망나니
왕자가
LEGEND OF SWORD'S SONG
글럼프
퓨전 판타지
장편소설
되었다
GOLEM
FACTORY

I BECAME THE FIRST PRINCE

-Legend of Sword's Song-

– 망나니 1왕자가 되었다 –

- VOLUME 2 -

-AUTHOR-

Glump

[Active Translations]

CHAPTER 50
SING, PLAY, AND DANCE (1)

The instant the Night Slayer came onto the battlefield, the Rangers on the walls shifted the aim of their crossbows to him.

“Fire!” commanded the knights who were watching the Orc. Before the ranks of Rangers could loosen the bolts from their crossbows, the Night Slayer was already moving. He grabbed two orcs, holding each in the air before him as they struggled helplessly with their legs.

“Kook? No, no, no!” one of these Orcs wailed as it saw its boss’s plan. The bolts poured down, slamming into the improvised meat shields, ripping into their green flesh.

“Fire again!”

The heartlessness of the Night Slayer, using his own kind in such a fashion, was a pitiable thing. The Rangers once more loosened their bolts without batting an eye at the brutal manners of the beast. His gaze was still fixed squarely on me, or rather, directly upon the flame of the true spirit that flared within my grasp. It was a fire that could burn both the body and soul of an Orc, so to them; it was a weapon of true irreverence. Its mere presence stimulated anger within their minds. I summoned a sparking flame using my willpower.

A spear was hurled towards me by an Orc below the ramparts, but it missed me by a few meters. Strikes from axes and blades were parried by me as well. It was then that my entire body started tingling, the feeling more pronounced within the nape of my neck. This overwhelming force was a tide of ill will and malice directed at me, and it was the effect of the battle fervor of the orcs.

“Aaggh!” I shouted as the foul energy bore into me at increasing levels. I struggled to withstand it. A few of the infantrymen around me were trying to get my attention.

“Your Majesty! Watch out!” Arwen’s voice broke into my mind just in time as I saw a spear hurtling towards me. I felt the murderous intent of it, more than any I had ever

sensed, for this spear held a great amount of lethal fervor within it. I dodged it just in time as it tore a great gouge into my hardened leather armor. I quickly identified the caster of this javelin: It was the Night Slayer himself. He was racked by laughter, all the while clapping his hands like a dancing hillbilly.

“Come here and face me!” I bellowed my challenge down at it. He started to ascend a siege ladder, which buckled dangerously under his weight. Realizing that the ladder was going to snap in half, he started to chuck the other Orcs off of it left, right and center. They screamed as they fell to their deaths. He was swiftly approaching my position by using this novel tactic, with his shining red eyes fixed creepily on me. By now, I could smell his rank breath as it rushed into my nostrils. I felt dizzy with anticipation for the bout that was to come. Suddenly, I sensed a mighty wave of battle fervor surging towards me once more. I countered it with a thrust of Twilight just in time as it dissipated into nothingness. My heart started to thud crazily in my breast as my excitement increased.

“Everyone, step back from the wall!” I commanded the men near me, who had been stunned by the surge of fervor thrown at us by the Night Slayer. They regained their senses and stepped back. A large furry hand, far larger than that of any Orc, slammed into the ramparts, gripping the stone like an iron vice. The stone almost cracked as a huge head popped into view. The eyes bore into me.

“It is you! You!” The Night Slayer bellowed as it finally came to stand upon the battlements. The way its voice sounded made me think that it was chewing iron. It launched itself from the edge of the bulwark, landing between me and the royal infantry.

“You were the one our king spoke about.”

Had I been younger, I would have laughed at this thing that spoke to me in such a manner. Now, I was filled with a sense of urgency. I shuddered, rubbing at my throat.

“Do you know who I am?” I asked the Night Slayer. The beast paused as it took in the battle raging all around us. “The Warlord had only mentioned you to me in passing,” it said as it turned its stern face to me once more. “He told me that a human who wielded a blasphemous flame could be found here.”

His red eyes flared up, and energy exploded from him as he unleashed his fervor. I felt mana flow across the walls as the knights attempted to block his power.

“Do not approach, and do not interfere!” I ordered them as I summoned my own mana around myself. The knights of Winter Castle had to ration their mana; I would not let them waste it all on one foe. I also knew that if they grouped together to charge the Orc with their weapons that he would kill them, squad, by squad, like fish in a barrel. My Uncle had said that we could hold this castle for weeks on end, yet that was not my intention. I knew very well how much we would suffer if we faced the Night Slayer’s army even for a few days.

I was going to end this battle right here and now, no matter the cost.

How could I make this thing flee, a being without fear? Could I use its rage against it, goading it into making mistakes? I was concerned, yet knew that right now that mattered little. I knew I had to be patient and enter this bout with a clear head. The realization hit me that this Orc would never flee, and never had I held the intention of allowing it to do so. The only course of action that remained was for us to battle until the death, until one stood as victor above the cooling corpse of the other.

In the next moment, a wolf came up to ladder beneath the wall. It held a huge sword within its maw, which it thrust upward with a swing of its neck. The Night Slayer neatly caught this weapon. Once more, fervor flowed from the Orc. An eerie blood-red aura started to swirl around him.

“I will present your head to my king,” he growled his promise. I readied Twilight and prepared myself for what was to come. With a swift motion, I struck at the Orc, with his blade meeting mine in an upward thrust. I twisted my wrists, forcing Twilight onto his crude blade. Twilight, an elegant sword forged by a master blacksmith, tore a notch into the inferior Orcish steel. Glowing red battle fervor smashed into the blue flame of my blessed blade. Our weapons started to tremble under the force of such magical powers. Twilight was pushed back a few inches, and I retreated with it, dodging backward as a crimson lance of fervor shot past my face. A burst of wind followed this attack and knocked me to the ground. The Orc’s sword bore down towards me, yet I rolled away just in time, suffering a mere cut on my little finger. He attempted to stomp on me, yet I vaulted to my feet, and his foot slammed into hard stone.

“Stop squirming around like a worm. Fight with honor and give it your all!” he growled at me, visibly angered by my successful evasions of his attacks.

I unleashed the extraordinary levels of power within my character as a response to

his goading.

“You smell so good!” he cawed deeply, licking his lips with a cruel tongue, his hunger evident. He was clearly expecting a feast. I would not even offer him the courtesy of providing a soup spoon, much less a hunk of meat. We had moved around during our bout, and I had the Night Slayer just where I wanted him. I raised my empty hand into the air and clenched my fist. Seeing my order, the Rangers upon a nearby tower threw down great nets made from iron chains.

“You have not been paying attention to your surroundings, Orc,” I said as one of the nets slammed into him. “Pull it tightly!” I commanded as Rangers heaved on lengths of chain, tightening this trap around the beast. The Night Slayer did not move, seemingly locked in place. Sharpened iron was cutting into his skin, yet he evinced no semblance of pain.

“You’ve polluted what was supposed to be an honorable duel!” he bellowed in rage. “I haven’t even tested your strength yet!” At that moment, he was jerked from the wall, crashing to the ground. A team of horses had been shackled to lengths of chain, and by this ingenious method, the Night Slayer had been forced into seemingly deadly plummet to the ground. The royal cavalry had been the architects of this tactic.

“Arwen,” I said, summoning her with a wave of my hand. She approached me, her face almost haggard, and handed me a cloth. I used this to wipe Twilight clean of any blood. Some of this blood I smeared across my arms, as a type of war paint. My hand shot up into the air, and with this, knights and Rangers rushed to the spot where the Night Slayer had fallen. I jumped from the wall, landing in a midden of hay. I brushed straw out of my eyes as they focused on my foe. I had known that the Orc was large, but seeing him up close again only reinforced this fact within my mind. He had also fallen into some hay and now stood up, shaking the stuff from his body.

“Stay back! The chains had come loose!” A drover bellowed from the royal cavalry as he tried to calm the horses under his care. A low moan escaped from the Night Slayer, who had already escaped from the net. His body had survived the fall intact, despite having fallen from such a great height. His one leg seemed a bit bruised, yet it was not impaired as he stood firmly with it. The thing snorted, its ugly nose flaring as the air escaped its nostrils.

“Waaaaghh!” it roared upon seeing me, as mad as a wounded buffalo hiding in a bed of reeds. It continued roaring as it charged straight at me. I prepared myself for the

impact, my legs ready to rush in for a clean strike at this enraged beast. At that very moment, a sword that shined with a blue light slashed at the charging Night Slayer, who parried it just in time, forced to retreat a few steps as it was faced with a new threat.

“The thing looks even uglier up close,” my Uncle flatly stated, risking a glance toward me, his blade held out before him.

“Uncle,” I said, showing my admiration at his masterful attack with a respectful nod.

“Good work, Ian. I’ll take it from here,” he said, his blade once more glowing with ethereal blue light. I knew then that the aura of his blade was that of a sword-master, much brighter than the flimsy aura of a sword-expert. My Uncle had finally reached the master level. The Night Slayer had by now regained his bearings. He stared at my Uncle, then at me, then once more at my Uncle. It was clear that the Orc decided my Uncle posed the greater immediate threat. This hurt my pride, for we had been in the middle of a fight.

“I’m not passing this battle entirely, Uncle. I’ll come back,” I said, knowing that there was something else I had to do.

“Don’t be too late, this Orc might be crow meat by then,” was his only response as he fired twin rays of blue light from his eyes. The Night Slayer rushed forward with a roar, releasing its own reserves of battle fervor. Red and blue waves of magical energy clashed into one another in rapid bursts, each time with a great banging sound. Mana and fervor exploded all around the warriors, swamping everything that surrounded them.

I studied my Uncle’s movements, which were so swift that only one with enhanced eyesight could observe them. His performance proved to me that the Knights of Gori were in no way lesser warriors than the Sword Masters. My Uncle’s blade also had a very intense aura, which impressed me. All this was not enough, however, for the Night Slayer was blocking each attack with ease.

My Uncle was a prosecutor who had reached the level of unity (合一), his will at one with the motions of his blade and his mana flowing through both at the same instant.

In contrast, the Night Slayer was born into a tribe that absorbed energies in a ghostly fashion, converting it into battle fervor. The Orc did not break a sweat as he

intercepted my Uncle's attacks.

I left the battle in that state, hurrying to the barracks. The entire place seemed empty, yet a sound drew my attention. In the corner of the large room sat a woman. Her eyes were shut tight, her hands covered her ears, and she was trembling in terror. Chaotic energies swirled around her, and I sensed the traits of [Heart Medicine], [Butcher], and [War Mania] emanating from her.

"Adelia," I said as I slowly approached her. She looked up at me, still trembling. Her face was white with shock, almost pathetic, and I drew no comfort from seeing it.

"Adelia, it is time to fight."

Upon hearing this command, her expression immediately became blank, emotionless. I took the cloth Arwen had given me and handed it to her. She stared at the bloodstain upon it for a brief second, then sniffed deeply at it. Her nostrils flared as her body stopped trembling. Her pupils dilated, and she stood up, her back straight.

"That's your prey. Go hunt!" A sound escaped from her lips, a simple sound that somehow contained the promise of violence within it.

Adelia had awoken. I handed her the sword, and a calm smile came to her upon receiving the weapon. Her eyes had turned a milky white. To behold them was to behold terror itself.

* * *

She leapt into a sprint, following the scent of her prey. I had never before seen her run in such a fashion, the movement not originating from training nor from any command I had given. Her body jerked as she ran, her movements being so very much like those of a lunatic.

The Adelia, who was always gentle and regal, was nowhere to be found. She paused, then cocked her head to one side at an unnatural angle. She tasted the air with her tongue and took a deep breath, then once more entered a maddened sprint. I heard the clash of weapons from the direction of the duel I had just left. Hearing this, I ran after Adelia, who had summoned golden energy to the tip of her sword.

Night Slayer, a rational being when compared to what Adelia currently was, turned

his head in her direction as he sensed the build-up of power. She came at him and made a running leap, her sword coming down towards him.

At that moment, I gained my answer.

I found out to what extent her traits of [Butcher] and [War Mania] had blossomed.

CHAPTER 51
SING, PLAY, AND DANCE (2)

Adelia sliced her sword at the Orc and leapt at him. The monster barely parried the blade. She briefly looked back at me, her multi-hued hair hanging across her face like the fronds of ferns. Auras of different hues surrounded her. The first aura was the color of blood and represented her [War Mania]. The other had a carnal, greasy stench to it, it was a sign of [Butcher].

The Orc gave a groan as he sensed her power, his eyes starting to glow a fiery red.

“Oh, my God!” I shouted as I saw Adelia get ready for another attack, all her terrible traits activated at once. She was controlled by an intense frenzy, even if she was faced by the intense build-up of battle fervor that the Night Slayer exhibited. No sign of her usual weakness could be seen; she knew no hesitation as she utilized her newly learned skill. Time and time again, her golden sword clashed against the red energies of the Orc’s fervor. Suddenly, Adelia stumbled while dodging a swipe from the Orc, collapsing to the ground. The Night Slayer moved in, focused on her prone form and looking to land a killer blow.

His blade came within inches of her neck as another blocked its descent: My Uncle had entered the fray once more. The Orc roared fiercely at this interruption, punching at my Uncle with its free hand. My Uncle’s sword came up, cutting into the Orc’s fist. Mana and fervor clashed once more as the Orc and the older man released their energies. Where these magical discharges met one another, a brilliant flash erupted.

Adelia’s golden blade flashed once more, its frenzied slashes forcing the Orc to retreat a few paces. My Uncle did likewise.

“Where is your honor, warrior?” The Night Slayer spat at my Uncle. The sudden attack by two warriors at once had angered it greatly, but before it could say more, the black shadow of movement that was Adelia charged at it again. Mighty strikes that seemed impossible for one with such a small frame as she came on after the other, the beast being hard-pressed to parry this frenzied assault.

“What type of embarrassment is this?” He snarled when he got the chance. Being insulted by Orcs was in itself a compliment, yet Adelia paid no heed to this fact, for she could not. No, she was unaware of her actions, her surroundings, and everything else. She just swung her weapon at him time and again like a madwoman, and one of these flashes finally stabbed into the Orc. He roared like a rabid animal, more out of shame and embarrassment than any feeling of pain. The fact was clear: His [Open Eyes] were of no use against [Butcher], which led a warrior to chop and hack away at their foe as if they were just a piece of meat on a slab, frenzied slashes with no subtlety or art. So too the nature of [War Mania] was well suited to counter the Night Slayer, for a lunatic gave no heed to their own safety or anything else: When an insane human attacked you, all that flashed through their mind was to end your existence at any cost and by any means, by tooth and nail if need be.

This monster, who had so easily fended off the assault of a Sword Master, was struggling against a woman who was a mere Sword Expert.

The Night Slayer was visibly maddened by her attacks, sporting a few ugly wounds already, for he was not well-armored. With every second that she fought, she seemed more and more like a crazy dog. I was glad that I did not have to face her bark or her bite. My Uncle now stood next to me, both of us unable to aid Adelia due to the unpredictable strikes that she launched at the beast.

“What the hell is that kid doing?” he asked me, shocked at her display.

“Let’s just say that she might be a light warrior, but also a heavy hitter,” I responded. He looked at me, nodding his agreement at my appraisal.

“Let’s finish this together,” I said, raising Twilight. My Uncle had also recovered and summoned his power into his blade.

I could hear shouts of encouragement coming from the walls, for the men knew that the best way to kill an Orc was to do so as fast as possible. The Orc, having created some space between himself and Adelia, looked in our direction as it sensed our powers. There was desperation in its eyes, and I was sure that it was regretting its earlier arrogance and impatient attack. It gave a roar, swinging its sword in a wild arc that smashed into Adelia’s blade, the force hurtling her into my arms. I held her, despite her frantic attempts to once more charge at the beast. The Orc was readying all its battle fervor at once, its dark green body glowing red as the power suffused its entire being.

“Even if I never stand before my King again,” his voice rang across the castle walls. “I shall ensure his might will never be ephemeral!”

His eyes bore into Adelia as she still struggled in my grip. She stopped her struggling as her soul, bound by [Poetry of Subjugation], absorbed and negated the malice and murderous intent directed at me through the Orc’s fervor. I hugged her tightly as I looked at my Uncle for guidance. He nodded, and I released Adelia, who averted her eyes as she made her departure.

I now stood before the Night Slayer and decided to utter a poem of hatred at the vile beast.

“I piled up green carcasses, raising myself a mountain!

Red streams flowed from it, as bloody nails.

I honor our fallen before this mountain of mine!”

Karmic power flowed into Twilight as I once more recited the phrases. The hatred against the Orcs had festered in the hearts of the soldiery of Winter Castle for many winters, and the defense gained new spirit as the Rangers and infantry embraced this anger. It was then that a great force slammed into all of us, a force that felt as if it was reducing my existence to the point of nullity. It had been the energy of the Warlord, which had overwhelmed us. My soul had been almost crushed, the blue flames sputtering out upon my blade. The Orc looked stronger than ever, his spirits raised. The flame of Jinsou had been placed in great danger by this release of power from the Warlord. “Goddamn Orcs,” I swore under my breath as I gritted my teeth, wondering whether I would open a part of my soul to counter what had just occurred. A new voice rang out, the voice of my Uncle:

“I piled up green carcasses, raising myself a mountain!”

“Uncle?”

“Red streams flowed from it.”

He repeated the [Poetry of True Marriage] time and time again, his voice almost stuttering.

His four rings started to rotate, a strong resonance emitting from them. The strong

wave of power from the Warlord still battered at my ears as if someone was pounding a gong inside my head. Yet, every time my Uncle spoke a verse, my heart regained a semblance of courage, his now eloquent voice sounding like a drum of war calling us to the march. Another voice now joined his:

“Red streams flowed from it, as bloody nails.”

It was from Vincent.

“I honor our fallen before this mountain of mine.”

Arwen’s voice joined Vincent’s. Then, the walls erupted in the verse of Muhunshi as the knights took up the poem.

“I piled up green carcasses, raising myself a mountain!

Red streams flowed from it, as bloody nails.

I honor our fallen before this mountain of mine!”

Hundreds of voices recited this as they faced their respective foes, their voices finally syncing up into a great roar of martial spirit. It felt now as if a great many drums were beating in my head all at once. Mana flowed freely through the air, and many rings had been activated. The energy I sensed made my breath come in short rasps, and my head feel dizzy. I suddenly knew what had to be done.

I felt every strand of mana in the air from every voice that sang my Muhunshi. I focused my spirit, gathered all these disparate strands into me, and united them when I recited the poem once more:

“I piled up green carcasses, raising myself a mountain! Red streams flowed from it. I honor our fallen before this mountain of mine!”

A new verse slipped from my tongue, coming unbidden:

“In the harshest season, we sing the bitterest songs.”

What I had created sounded different from Muhunshi, and very unlike the melodies that the elves sang in their sword dances. A message appeared then:

『You have created a new poem.』

『Its class is [Poetry of War], and it is the first of its kind.』

More verses escaped from my lips after I had seen this alert:

“Silent are the snowy mountain peaks and the blood-drenched walls.

Only our horns of war are heard, for a new day dawns into which we advance!”

This song swam around within my brain, like a fevered hallucination. The great drum kept pounding in my head as my heartbeat quickened. I took a step forward, singing the poem I had crafted softly under my breath. The flames that had deserted me once more made their power known. The Night Slayer was staring directly at me, the red fervor still glowing in his eyes. Slowly I advanced towards this beast, not a kernel of fear to be found within my breast. My Uncle, who had been ready to attack the Orc once more, could see that something within me had changed. He stepped back.

The Night Slayer tightened his two-handed grip upon the hilt of his sword, emitting a loud roar. He clearly was not going to back down from me. The roar did not sound as fierce to me as before. No, it sounded like the mewling of a frightened cub. He gave a yell, charging at me with his sword raised, the last of his battle fervor thrown toward me in a last desperate surge. I held my ground, thrusting Twilight sharply into the air as I released my own power. A blue spear of light sped from me, spreading through the air as it pierced through the Night Slayer’s heart.

The Orc stared stupidly at where my power had cleaved into him, staring at the empty hole where seconds ago his heart had still pumped his lifeblood through him.

“My king…” He managed to utter before blue flames spread from his wound, consuming him in a glorious blaze. It was at that moment that a great crashing sound reverberated through the courtyard as the gate of Winter Castle came crashing down. Ordered lines of infantry had filled the gap, Orcs already charging into the breach.

“Hook the thing and pull it back up! Hook it back up!” came the frantic orders from a siege-engineer, the entire left half of his body burned gruesomely by a mishap with a cauldron of burning oil. I calmly made my way to this breach in our defenses, soldiers respectfully making way for me as they sensed my newfound power. Orcs

who had failed to gain our battlements were now pushing and shoving at each other, their eagerness to charge through the gate impeding their collective momentum. I now stood before the gathered ranks of defenders, raising my sword to the sky. Against a darkened sky and the snowy ground, the blue lighting that flowed from Twilight lit up the sky, as if in a mockery of dawn.

“Men, let us be ready!” My Uncle’s voice washed over the knights and infantrymen who stood behind me. None of them evinced the exhaustion that should by all rights have rendered them ineffective after so many hours of the brutal battle. Mana still flowed freely among the knights; I could feel their magical energies pulse in tune with my heartbeat.

Now was the time for a righteous battle.

“Adrian, at your command,” my Uncle said as he turned to me. All the gathered squads of knights and infantry had their eyes raptly focused on me, relishing the moment when that one single word would escape from my lips. The Orcs had been driven back a few meters by my crackling wall of flame, some having trampled over their comrades. Their lines were in disarray.

“Charge,” I said, almost a whisper as I pointed my sword at the ranks of our most hated foe.

“Charge! Charge!” My forces roared, taking up my command and rushing towards the breach. A flash of gold was seen as Adelia rushed into the fray as well, felling Orcs left and right by severing their heads and limbs with her frenzied, inhuman strikes.

The Rangers upon the walls, not able to fire their crossbows into the chaotic melee below them, sang songs of war to bolster the hearts of their comrades. In fact, I recognized the verses that flowed from their mouths:

“Silent are the snowy mountain peaks and the blood-drenched walls.

Only our horns of war are heard, for a new day dawns into which we advance!”

With Twilight aflame in my grasp, I also charged forward. I would cleave through the massed ranks of greenskins like an avenging angel, cleansing Winter Castle of their corrupt kind once and for all.

CHAPTER 52
THE AWL IN THE POCKET IS PROTRUDING (1)

My hands ached as I slashed again and again at any Orc that dared face my fury. My body was bruised and cut all over. It had been quite some time since my stamina had become so low during a battle. Our defense held as the Rangers upon the walls continued their song, and the men around me continued the defense of Winter Castle. The Orcs had marched all the way here from the Blade's Edge Mountains, yet they were not weakened enough to quickly fall before our magical blades. However, they surely weren't strong enough to overwhelm our position. This was a new way of fighting that the Orcs exhibited, for they had managed to gain our battlements and tear down our gate.

The Rangers had already dealt with the Orcs on the walls, though the battle still raged. Any cry of victory would be premature, for massed ranks of the things moved along the wall into the breached castle gate. I was anxious to end this siege as soon as possible, though I knew the possibility of a massed charge outside the castle by my forces was still far off. Or was it?

A few squads of knights had hacked their way almost all the way to the gate. Upon seeing their brave advance, my blood boiled with battle-lust.

"The battle still rages!" I heard a Ranger's call. "We need to charge the fuckers now!" The Rangers, their commanders having little say, drew their swords and joined our defense of the gap. I noticed this swelling of our forces, blue flame coming once more to Twilight as I led my knights against the corrupt Orcs, knowing that once we pushed them out of the gates, the Rangers at our back could spread out to bolster our line. My knights rallied behind me as we crashed into the Orcs in a wedge formation, the beasts falling left and right before our righteous assault. I had complete command over the spearhead, focusing their efforts to the left and then the right, finally slowing our advance as we strengthened our line, gaining a meter every minute as we drove the foe further from our walls. During this entire movement, the Rangers had not once relented in their battle song.

"I piled up green carcasses, raising myself a mountain!

Red streams flowed from it, as bloody nails.

I honor our fallen before this mountain of mine!"

This Muhunshi poem echoed through our lines, instilling a righteous fury in the breasts of the soldiery. We hacked and slashed until finally, only a small group of the hated beasts remained. I focused on these remaining few, unleashing the power within me. Blue flames engulfed them, not one even having the chance to utter a yelp as they became nothing but ash drifting onto the snow. Not one Orc remained alive as my blue flames slowly smoldered into nothingness. As the First Prince, I stood tall upon that snowy field, my entire body covered in Orcish blood. My head was bowed in silence, my sword steaming as the escaping heat misted the blood upon it. The loot from the Orcs was mine.

"I won!" Was the exclamation that escaped my lips. Our defense had held. The Orcs had been annihilated. The siege was lifted.

"Long live the First Prince! Long live the First Prince!"

This came from the Rangers, and from my own throat, dry from my war poem. We had won, and sore throats were a pittance when compared to that glorious truth. Vincent sat down beside me with a thud.

"Huh, we definitely destroyed them," he said as he took in the dead Orcs scattered across the bloody snow. His voice had a hazy quality to it, almost sounding like a dreamer having awoken from a long slumber. Many of the knights also sank to the ground, giving in to their exhaustion.

These knights had been the bulwark of our defense, and they deserved every second of rest. The Rangers, many of them having doubted our chances at victory from the very beginning, started to do their appointed duties of gathering our dead and wounded. Some of them grumbled at the relaxing knights. I quickly scolded them and oversaw the removal of our dead as they were carried through the gates and into the courtyard. A commander glanced at me, seeing no doubt a noble prince who leant against a tattered battle banner. A woman sporting many wounds sat in the snow a few feet from him, her head resting against my thigh. Some of the knights entered their chant, and the commander's face took on a mask of utmost wonder.

"It must be amazing to be able to channel Muhunshi," he said to me.

“It is unlike battle dances,” I replied with a voice soaked with fatigue. The commander glanced at the woman at my side and me. I could see him considering us as if we were lying in bed together. He then beckoned to some Rangers who were not busy piling up dead Orcs.

“Light the fire,” he commanded them. When the last Orc was thrown onto this great pile, oil and pitch were poured all along the edges of it. Finally, the Rangers threw their torches, and the Orc carcasses lit into a great inferno, the pungent smell of it assaulting our noses. Thousands of dead Orcs burned that day, and so great was the heat of this pyre that it was seen from many miles away—seen by beings outside of Winter Castle.

A woman sat upon the peak of the arid mountain. Her eyes blazed with ecstasy as she looked at the wall of flame and smoke that rose from the battlefield below her. She was Sigrun, the Elder High Elf. Her face possessed a divine beauty, from her pronounced chin to the very tips of her pointy ears. She giggled as she watched the flames, a capricious little giggle, her face as unreadable as that of a cat.

“The war…” said a voice. Upon hearing it, Sigrun’s body immediately grew taught as she vaulted from the old tree that was her perch.

Eun-an had spoken. He blazed like a shining star, and his eyes possessed a near-infinite depth that was intent upon their study of Winter Castle.

At that moment, a great bestial roar resounded throughout the mountains. It was a fierce roar, yet it also had the quality of a trapped animal about it.

“Please do not come upon him swiftly,” Sigrun whispered to herself. “He must have time to grow some more.” She gave a soft chuckle, followed by a satisfied smile. She was here to make her presence known, knowing that it would place the King of the Mountain on an alert footing. Maybe this would prevent him from leaving his fastness for a while. She stared once more at Winter Castle as if staring directly at someone dear. Her eyes glazed over in a dewy manner, her voice coming sounding oh-so-sweet.

“Please win as you have won today,” her sugary voice said, though not in a tone of love. No, Sigrun’s words were filled with nothing but her twisted desires.

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The Northern Lords and their more central counterparts were in an uproar, for a single missive had reached them by carrier pigeon from the northernmost realm in which Winter Castle stood.

“Balahard has asked for our aid!” their spokesman told those who have not yet heard the news. Winter had just begun, and usually, this meant that any military action by the monsters would still be in its infancy. Already, a request for support had arrived. This was a dire omen, for the shield of the North, having held fast for many centuries, was now starting to crack.

“Alert all the families at once! Sent out the heralds!”

Everyone occurred with this conclusion. Their First Prince had traveled North, and all the gathered nobles shuddered, unsure whether Winter Castle and therefore he himself, still stood firm. All knew that if the Balahard family fell, nothing would stop the cruel winter from raging South.

Suffice it to say, to call the current situation a disaster would be a cruel understatement.

The heralds rode North and South, alerting every noble house, whether petty or mighty. Some were outraged or frightened by the reports, while others merely scoffed and dismissed them out of hand, especially the Southern lords. They saw the whole thing as a political ploy to impoverish their houses and divide their forces, for their recollections of the brutal nature of the foe was not as fresh as that of many Northern houses. These nobles enjoyed their lives of leisure and indolence under their warmer sun, and soon no heralds came to them anymore. Clearly, they were obstinate, and sending messengers their way was a waste of horseshoes and hay.

Even those who saw the truth of the matter merely assumed that the prince had been killed and wondered who the next king would be. The Northern families, though, were anxious for any news, and this news finally came. A rider now stood before the gathered nobility.

“Hear me out, Lords! Two entire corps of elite Orcs had besieged Winter Castle. By the vigorous efforts of the third legion as well as the Balahard Rangers, this entire force has been wiped out!”

The mood in the room took changed as the nobles heard a report they did not

suspect to hear.

“Ah, Count Balahard! You remain the unbroken shield of our kingdom!” A lord uttered, his relief evident. Not all shared his relief, however, and the herald’s next statement reinforced their hesitation:

“Winter Castle is preparing itself for another battle, whether on our terms or that of the foe. All scattered troops of Count Balahard have been summoned to the castle. Yet, so great are the numbers that the enemy can field that our force will even then be inadequate, so we are desperate to receive any and all forms of reinforcement.

“And what of the casualties you have suffered?” a lady asked, arching her brow. Here, the messenger beamed with pride.

“The battle was fierce and many foes we faced, yet thankfully we did not lose that many men.”

“Why then do you come crawling here, begging for our aid?” a visiting Southern lord asked, not even attempting to hide the scorn in his voice.

“The size of the enemy forces is unprecedented, and it is our commander’s judgment that victory is impossible with just our current troops.”

“How many monsters does this enemy field?” a more reasoned voice inquired.

“Our current count has them at eight legions. This would be sixteen-thousand Orcs, all waiting to move South. These legions consist of Orc Shamans, Orc Warriors and Orc Clan Chiefs.”

“What? That many?” a lord exclaimed, sitting down in shock as he rapidly blinked his eyes.

“Eight legions, my lord. Yet, there is worse news. An Orcish king has appeared, and he alone leads his armies. That is why the Excellency, my commander, has requested your support, asking that you send every soldier that you can field as soon as possible.”

The lords were silent at this news. Eight legions of Orcs were an army twice as large as the soldiers that could be fielded by the kingdom. These numbers rolled around in the lord’s head, and as he had never picked up the blade, being a lord of peace, he

chose to deny reality.

“I have never heard of this… King of the Orcs. And surely, all of us gathered here know that if more than one Orc stands in a room it is only a matter of minutes until they tear at each other’s throats. To say that so many Orcs have gathered together toward a single purpose is absurd!”

Many of those gathered nodded their agreement, knowing well the anarchic nature of Orcish society.

The herald, and his masters, had expected this reply. He motioned for two stevedores standing in the back of the hall to bring a wooden chest to the fore. Lord Young-ju immediately assumed that it was a chest of gold, paying for the support of the gathered nobility. He licked his greedy lips.

The chest was opened, and from it, a huge Orc’s head was removed, the thing having been pickled in vinegar so as to prevent it from rotting during its long journey. The Lord stepped back in fright, and the messenger had an almost embarrassed look on his face.

“This is the decapitated head of the Orc, a Night Slayer, who had led the siege upon Winter Castle. His Majesty, the First Prince, has defeated this foe and has kindly sent you its head, as an object lesson of the peril we face. As you can see, my Lord, this head is five times larger than that of an ordinary Orc, and twice as large as the head of an Orc warrior.”

Most of the herald’s words passed the lord by. All that he could see was the giant Orcish head, its sturdy jaw, and the ugly, brutish forehead with dead eyes that somehow yet bespoke of a cruel malevolence. The herald continued his assessment of this grim showpiece.

“It has been confirmed by precise measurement that the body of this specimen was at least three times as large as that of a normal Orc. Based on the abnormal growth of this single Orc, we can safely assume that there is indeed a King of the Orcs.”

The herald slammed the lid of the chest shut.

“My masters hope that you now grasp the importance and the urgency of this matter.”

Despite the formality and arrogance of the messenger, the Lord evinced no anger. No, his heart was gripped by dread, seeing this cruel, monstrous skull as an ill omen of events to come.

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And so it came to be that many heralds traveled across the land, each with a different limb hacked from the body of the Night Slayer. They visited the central lords as well, those who had been the most skeptical and hesitant when the first message had found their ears. Upon seeing the grim truth rotting before their eyes, they soon grasped the gravity of this Northern threat. The heralds now all met each other upon the royal road. Before they entered the capital, they assembled each piece of the Night Slayer, mounting its carcass upon a wagon like some strange exhibit as could be found in a museum of curiosities. Most of the High Lords dismissed Winter Castle's peril, even after seeing the carcass of the Orc displayed in full before them. Accusations of inflating the situation to gain political leverage were fielded against the Balahard family. The lords who voiced their support for Count Balahard, considering the threat serious, were in the greater minority. The King finally entered the hall and seated himself upon his throne.

The heralds informed him of what the Orc was and that the First Prince had slain it.

"Well, it has been killed by someone who has not even held a sword for a year! It is large, yes, but surely if it was killed by so young a man it can't be more ferocious than your regular, run-of-the-mill Orc," one lord stated in a mocking manner. Many more joined him, denigrating the First Prince's martial prowess and casting aspersions as to the political ambitions of Count Balahard. Some even said that the Orc's carcass was an elaborate hoax.

"Hold your tongue! You dishonor the dedication of Count Balahard in holding our Northern border against abominations such as this," the Marquis of Bielefeld voiced. He and a few others vehemently defended the Balahards.

"Silence!"

The entire hall went quiet within an instant, for the king had spoken, his hand raised in command.

"I know the Count Balahard well, and he is not one for hoaxes and the scheming you

ascribe to him. If he says the matter facing his lands is serious, he surely speaks no falsehood."

The nobles did not dispute this; most of them knowing that the count would not idly ask for aid. They had grasped at the chance of sullying his character, nothing more and nothing less.

"Your Majesty, will we then support the Northern Houses as much as we are able?" the Marquis of Bielefield asked, hope creeping into his voice.

"Oh, indeed," came the king's idle response. "Gung Jung-baek will contract a suitable force of mercenaries and send them to the North."

The faces of many nobles, especially the Marquis of Bielefeld's, darkened at this statement. Their belief that the kingdom was rotten to its core became much deeper.

"Oh, and send those noble sons convicted by trial North as well. Let them wash their sins away in the sea of battle," the king added as an afterthought, not noticing the hateful glances a few of his nobles had cast at him. All hope was not lost, however, as a strong voice sounded throughout the hall:

"The royal family should not turn its back on the utter devotion and loyalty shown to it by the Balahards," the Second Prince spoke as he came to stand before the King. He was the favorite choice for succession, and many believed that he was the earthly incarnation of the First King, the founder of the kingdom.

"Your Majesty, I will ride North with all my knights."

CHAPTER 53
THE AWL IN THE POCKET IS PROTRUDING (2)

The king considered the Second Prince's daring intercession, finally conceding that the Balahards played a very important role in the realm.

"I will send two legions of mercenaries, instead of one. I will also not prevent you from leading your knights to the north, as you are free to choose your own battles. However, the Hana Knights and the Central Army will not be deployed, and this is my final judgment."

With these words, the meeting was called to an end. The king retired to his chambers, summoning the Second Prince for a private audience.

"Maximilian, you are correct. The Balahards cannot be allowed to fall."

The Second Prince was surprised by this statement. Only a while ago, his father had only wished to send a single legion of mercenaries, yet after hearing his son speak, he had upped that forced to two.

"I know, father. Yet, I feel that your dignity has somehow been tarnished by that meeting, in the eyes of some lords at least."

"Son, I am already rolling in this muddy swamp of intrigue that has been spun about me. Don't you think that if I shovel even more dirt into the chaos that I don't have a reason for doing so?" The king said, his tone sounding embarrassed. What his tone failed to convey was the utter reckless disregard he held his own actions in.

"I… I don't understand why Your Majesty would foster the stigma against the Blahad's like the cruel cancer that it is," Maximilian stated, his face openly showing his sorrow. The king gave a guffaw at this statement.

"Burgundy has eyes and ears everywhere. One needs to dissemble if one's intentions are to remain a mystery to one's rivals," the king stated in a whisper. "If I were to rouse all my troops and march north, what do you think the empire's response would be? Montpellier would scoff at the possibility of Balahard asking me for aid.

No, he would think I aim to invade his lands!"

"If…"

"There are no ifs, boy! Do you want to have the royal family kiss Count Balahard's arse and sing him to sleep? You know how Adrian acted at the banquet." The Second Prince and the king continued like this for a while.

"Maximilian, you are my son."

"Yes, sire," the prince said as he knelt.

"It saddens me, but I have passed this frightful cause onto your shoulders. You will ride north, as you said you would. The north must be firm, and voices such as Bielefield's must be silenced in my halls, as their dissent borders upon the traitorous. You are upon the right path, and those who still serve Leonberger's name will flock to your cause."

"I will see to it," Maximilian assented with a sluggish nod.

"It won't be easy. Count Balahard has formally declared himself to be Adrian's guardian, and he is not one to ever break his word, especially not where guarding things are concerned."

"Yes father, I know Winter Castle might possibly be filled with traitors seeking your downfall."

The atmosphere in the room suddenly became thrice as cold, and Maximilian wisely said no more. He was not swayed to his father's point of view, though.

"Never forgot what shame your older brother has bought upon our name, all those years ago."

"He was only thirteen at the time!" Maximilian sputtered in defense of his sibling.

"That child ran his mouth and almost sold the future of our kingdom to the damned empire!"

"But he…"

“I will hear no more!” the king bellowed, his voice brooking no dissent. “I can still see it so clearly… Their shattered swords, their screams as the rings were cut from their fingers… Their bloody tears and that cruel laugh of Montpellier… I will never forget!”

“Sire… Father…”

“Decades of planning, all for nothing. The collective effort of many generations, destroyed in an instant.”

Maximilian hesitated before he spoke once more.

“I believe that my brother is repenting for the errors of his past. He is truly contributing much in his defense of the north.”

“Hah! He does not know regret, or seeks repentance. No, the cur has forgotten his sins entirely! I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Go north, son. And beware of Montpellier, for he would disrupt our efforts at every turn.”

“My will is my own, father. Please remember that.”

The king sadly shook his head at these words. At that moment, he seemed to have aged ten years.

“Please… Go well son, and good luck.”

Maximilian bowed to his king and made his departure, giving a sad sigh once he was out of the monarch’s earshot.

* * *

The preparations for the campaign were completed in due time. It came to be that the king disguised some of his elite troops as mercenaries. They were to be led by Count Ellen and included knights and infantry from the central army as well as Wire Knights. Three thousand Silver Fox mercenaries, famous across the continent, had also been hired.

The troops were ready, yet the supply lines were not. Every day that his march was delayed felt like a month to Maximilian, and every week like a year. There was no trumpeting of horns or fluttering of flags as the army set out upon the royal road; no, they marched off in silence so as to draw as little attention to themselves as possible.

He was frustrated at their slow pace and finally forced the soldiers into a brisk march, not wishing to come upon an empty plain of corpses. Finally, the northern pass was reached, though ten percent of his forces, this being four-hundred men and about forty wagons, had been left behind in the march, some passing out due to exhaustion and others simply deserting.

Many men complained about the frigid climate, as they had not come upon an empty grassy plain but stood staring at an endless flat expanse of pure white snow. Carts struggled through the snow, and beside them walked men wearing thick fur coats, their eyes squinting as the winter winds blew endlessly into them. Seeing these carts, two scouts detached themselves from the vanguard, wishing to know who would brave the snows so deep into winter. The truth was unsettling.

“Refugees?” Fumed Maximilian. The men had come from the south of Balahard’s lands. If people were already fleeing, then perhaps things had become far worse since the army had marched from the capital. His fears were soon allayed, though, as it seemed that Count Balahard had issued a decree of emergency, wishing to keep the populace under his care out of harm’s way. However, the presence of refugees still boded ill, for it meant that the Count considered the fall of Winter Castle to be within the realms of possibility. Maximilian pushed his men even harder after this, leaving those who could not acclimatize laying in the snow. It was not only the cold that plagued the hearts of his men, for their meeting with the refugees had, in some sense, spread fear of the battle to come throughout the ranks.

As they moved further north, the number of refugees they met heading the other way increased. No longer did single families flee to safer climes, now entire villages of hundreds of people had been uprooted by the threat of war. The refugees themselves could not tell the prince much, for they were simply following Balahard’s decree as enforced by his Rangers. Maximilian became greatly impatient at the pace of their march, yet had to content himself with it as they struggled through blizzard after blizzard. He knew that if he commanded greater speed from the soldiers that many would desert. It was within one of these blizzards that the sound of voices was heard, the prince commanding his men to march in its direction.

“Green… as bloody… before… peaks… advance…”

These fragments of a song the prince heard. His men now picked up their pace at their own accord. Finally, the entire song could be made out over the roar of the snowstorm:

“We piled up green carcasses, raising a mountain! Ha!

Red streams flowed from it, as bloody nails. Ha!

We honor our fallen before this mountain of ours! Ha!

In the harshest season, we sing the bitterest songs. Ha!

Silent are the snowy mountain peaks and the blood-drenched walls. Ha!

Only our horns of war are heard, for a new day dawns into which we advance! Ha!”

The song had a martial theme; of that, there was no doubt.

“Are those soldiers of Balahard?” Maximilian asked one of his scouts. He soon gained his answer as a knight appeared, infantry in snowshoes plodding after him. Maximilian called a halt to his army as the man identified himself:

“I am Chuong Seong, commander of the third company of Balahard’s Rangers,” the officer said, saluting with a hand wrapped in thick fur. “It is an honor to greet His Majesty, Second Prince Maximilian!”

“We had received reports that a great force was moving through our lands, and I was anxious to know whether it was the army of our king. However, with the weather like this, it took us a while to track you down. The Ranger bowed respectfully. “Your Majesty, my suggestion is to leave the carts behind and march your men to safety. We can return for the baggage trains once this inclement weather passes.”

The prince hesitated, then saw the wisdom in Chuong Seong’s words.

“All divisions, move out! Take what you can carry, we will return for the baggage! Keep your eyes open in this storm, I do not want a single man left behind!”

His orders were soon relayed among the ranks, and a struggling march set out under the guidance of the Rangers, who once more took up their battle songs.

“Huh, they said that the men of the north were dour and silent, never prone to song. How wrong they were,” Erhim Kiringer, deputy commander of the Wire Knights who had been disguised as mercenaries, stated as he clucked his tongue.

“Ah, I love this song. It is the third legion’s battle chant, ‘Winter City’. It is quite inspiring,” the platoon commander informed the prince with a smile. “When we sing this, we feel warmer and haler, so we always sing loudly when we march.”

Maximilian nodded at this, feigning an act of understanding.

“Well, it is partly a song created by the First Prince, but we added lines and made it our own.”

“My brother wrote this?” Maximilian asked as his eyes widened. He would never have imagined his brother as a dabbling poet, and the obvious admiration the Ranger showed when talking about the First Prince was also surprising. Erhim Kiringer had noted this latter fact as well.

“Your majesty, your brother had created another song. Should we sing it?”

Before the prince could even answer, the Rangers once more broke out in song and sang for a goodly while, clearly enjoying every moment of it despite the jagged nature and lack of rhyming that the chant exhibited.

Maximilian and Ehrim exchanged looks. These rangers were clearly not the dour Northmen they had expected to meet. Despite their weirdness, they were definitely Rangers, for they led the entire army despite the blizzard and the approaching night, guided by their intimate knowledge of the land.

“A blizzard like this was also raging when His Majesty the First Prince came to us,” Cheong Seong said, his expression taking on a strange cast. Once more, Maximilian was surprised, for this man clearly greatly admired the First Prince.

“He came out of the blizzard, bearing a wounded soldier upon his back.” Maximilian gave an awkward chuckle at this statement. The Ranger once more took to the song, and the prince soon grew bored with the man. After some time of marching, the blizzard raged less around them. Cheong Seong halted them, pointing to a far-off spot.

“There lies Winter Castle, the kingdom’s most northerly fortress.” The Ranger sounded quite cheerful while saying this, though the scene itself was very grim, to say the least. Corpses of Orcs were scattered across the snowy fields. Some were mere skeletons, and others had been locked in ice, unseeing eyes staring at the soldiers who marched on by.

Maximilian bit his lip as the pungent smell of rotting meat assaulted his nostrils. A group of men appeared in the distance, approaching the army. It was a Ranger platoon.

“Have you gone out on reconnaissance?” Cheong Seong asked their leader as they finally came up to them. The man nodded and informed them that they had run into a small squad of Orcs. The First Prince had come with these men.

“Hail Cheong Seong, and who are these guys with you?”

The Ranger Platoon Commander’s eyes widened at this. How did the prince not recognize his own brother? The Second Prince was clearly shocked that his older brother had changed so much, while the First Prince acted as if he had never seen his brother before. Truly, this was an awkward reunion between the two.

“Hello, brother,” Maximilian said, finally breaking the silence that had stretched out between them.

CHAPTER 54
THE AWL IN THE POCKET IS PROTRUDING (3)

Maximilian's discomfort at his brother's changed appearance was clearly shown on his face. Adrian smiled warmly. He was clearly happier at meeting his brother than he was at the arrival of his army.

"Brother," Maximilian said again. "My soldiers are tired after having marched through the blizzard.

"Yes, I understand," said Adrian, a look of arrogance coming to his features as he studied the reinforcements.

"Welcome to Winter Castle!" He said to them. He spoke as if he was the lord of the castle. The Rangers raised their swords, affirming the prince's welcome as the legendary castle framed their salute. Maximilian marveled at the great fortress, yet his mood was dampened by the corpse-strewn fields surrounding it.

"Follow me, then," Adrian said as he casually made his way toward Winter Castle, obviously unperturbed by the corpses that were scattered about everywhere. Maximilian hesitated, then followed his brother. The odor became much worse after a while, the tinge of burnt flesh now added to it. The Second Prince endured his nausea as he pressed on. The sound of soldiers vomiting could be heard clearly along the line as his army followed him.

The soldiers, even the veteran Silver Fox mercenaries, were all clearly exhausted, and the death around them did nothing to improve their moods. It was hard for Maximilian to keep up a pretense at being calm.

"There was a great battle here, then?" he asked his older brother.

"Uh, yes, three days ago," Adrian replied as if it was no big deal. "You will get used to the stench soon enough."

The manner in which Adrian spoke terrified Maximilian. How long did a man have to wage war to become so unfazed upon seeing hundreds of rotting corpses? Cheong

Seong noticed the Second Prince's anxiety.

"Trust me, Your Majesty, after meeting live Orcs, the dead ones look much prettier," he said, trying to comfort Maximilian. However, these words did not have te intended effect.

"Yeah, that's true," the First Prince added. As they came upon the gates, an elderly man and dozens of knights came out to meet them. The Rangers saluted them and took up position behind their lines.

"I give my tribute to the royal line of Leonberger, keepers of Valehad's veil," the Count Balahard said in greeting.

"I laud the honor of the shield that blocks the north wind," Maximilian replied.

"I express my infinite gratitude for the fact that the royal family has not forgotten the harshness of winter, and that you have marched here through the toughest of weather."

"My apologies for arriving at such late a time, for I see you have faced many battles."

After these customary greetings have been exchanged, the First Prince touched Cheon Seong's shoulder. The Ranger Platoon Commander then took up his horn and blew into it. Countless banners were raised upon the walls in answer to the trumpet's call. The infantry proudly displayed sword and spear, welcoming the reinforcements as brothers in battle.

"Welcome to the lands of Balahard!" Some of the soldiers shouted.

"Our respect for the unchanging friendship of the royal family," others called down.

The welcoming ceremony came as a relief to Maximilian, who had at one point during their harsh march thought that they would never reach Winter Castle to receive one. Erhim glanced at the prince, who shouted a response at those gathered upon the walls, reinforcing his voice with mana so that it reverberated throughout the fortress:

"On behalf of the royal family, I express gratitude at your dedication, struggle and sacrifice! I salute the soldiers of Balahard!"

The soldiers answered him with cheers.

“Let us go inside, then,” Adrian said.

* * *

“Your Majesty,” Ehrim Kiringer said as he approached the reclining Maximilian. The deputy commander of the Wire Knights clearly had something on his heart.

“Have you seen that gate?” The knight asked the prince, who nodded.

“The iron plates that had been riveted across it are newly forged, a sign of hasty repairs.”

“You have an observant eye, Your Majesty. I have found out that the entire gate had been breached during the siege.”

Maximilian’s face hardened at hearing this. “Upon seeing the corpses, I had already guessed that Winter Castle had been hard pressed. Hearing that the gate had been breached, though, means that matters have reached a critical point,” he finally said to Ehrim.

“Yes, the situation is direr than even I had expected.”

“Yet, the people of Balahard do not seem to be in bad spirits.”

The battle that had raged three days ago had clearly come at the cost of many human lives; nevertheless, the Rangers and even the Count himself had greeted them warmly, their spirits not broken in the least. It was an incomprehensible state of affairs to Maximilian.

“Let us observe things, for now, we have so little information to act upon.”

Ehrim nodded at these words. “Why did you seem so perplexed upon meeting your brother? Surely it has been some time since both of you have seen one another, I expected more emotion from such a reunion.”

“It… It is embarrassing to explain,” Maximilian finally answered, clearly caught on the wrong footing by such direct a question. “But I could clearly see that his nature was not as rumor had it to be.”

He had wanted to meet his brother for as long as he had remembered, yet his father had always striven to prevent such a meeting. He had only grown to know Adrian through the rumors that passed through the court. In the brother he had met, bloody upon a field of corpses, there was no sign of the incompetent sadist he had expected to find. The men of the north held Adrian in high esteem, and these men were fierce warriors who held no truck with craven curs.

Sir Ehrim then recounted to Maximilian the visit of the First Prince to Wire Castle and the impressive exhibition of his swordsmanship against veteran knights. Ehrim chuckled as he recalled the way in which Adrian had fought so well. Maximilian was surprised by this tale.

“Why did the rumors of my brother’s changed nature not become common knowledge?”

“He forbade us of recounting his actions, Your Majesty.”

This statement gave Maximilian some pause. Many were the tales of people gradually changing as life threw new challenges into their paths, but someone who changed so quickly and so completely? One’s nature did not alter suddenly from what one was born as. The natural assumption, in this case, was that his brother had hidden the talents he had been born with, only later choosing to bare them to the world.

“It is simpler to hide that which is there than to create it anew,” he mused.

“What was that, your majesty?” Ehrim inquired.

“Oh, nothing,” Maximilian said as he shook his head.

He was still unsure about this state of affairs. Further observation was required. The winter in the north was a long season, and he would be here until spring finally came. This was more than enough time to gain the answers that he sought. Ehrim left him then, and he decided to get some rest before the formal welcoming banquet. He did not wish for the commanders of Winter Castle to see him this exhausted, and therefore as a weakling. His rest was soon disturbed as someone knocked roughly upon the door. He had scarcely moved to open it when it opened itself, with the First Prince striding uninvited into the room and plopping into a chair.

“Hey,” Adrian said. “You don’t say much, do you?”

“No,” Maximilian replied warily, also taking a seat, trying not to appear intimidated by this rough intrusion. The silence stretched between them, and for the Second Prince, it felt like he sat upon a cushion of nails. He even coughed a few times, though his brother did not even notice.

“You really look like him,” Adrian finally said.

“Are you saying I resemble father?” Maximilian had never before been told such a thing. His brother did not answer as his gaze bore into the Second Prince.

“How do you find Winter Castle, Adrian? Is it more inconvenient, living here rather than in the royal palace?”

“Oh, I love it here.”

Maximilian was taken aback by this answer. “Is that so?”

“Yes. There is battle here, a constant tide of monsters to be slain.” Maximilian’s head swam as he struggled to understand the context from which his brother viewed reality. How could he be awkward and uncomfortable now, he, the Second Prince who had dealt and commanded nobles both on and off the field of battle?

“I came here to tell you that the dinner is ready,” the First Prince finally said. Maximilian almost jumped with joy at hearing this, his hunger a ravenous thing. “I see that you are also very hungry.”

Upon entering the banqueting hall, Maximilian was met by Count Balahard and the other commanders of Winter Castle, who stood as they greeted him in turn. The banquet then commenced, course by course. Rice was heaped up before him, and Maximilian made to put something else on his plate. His brother scolded him.

“You have traveled far, and your body is tired. It is best if you stick to rice tonight, to let your stomach rest,” Adrian instructed him. The Second Prince looked around, seeking aid from the nobles whose plates were filled to the brim with sweetmeats and steamed fruit. They all nodded at Adrian’s suggestion, even Count Balahard, who stated that it was for the best.

* * *

The banquet had finally wound down, and Maximilian felt as bloated as a bullfrog

after shoving plate after plate of rice into his mouth. Indeed, the First Prince had studied his brother this entire time, sometimes wondering whether the rice entered through the mouth or the nose, the way the Second Prince had stuffed himself. Count Balahard motioned to the large pot of rice.

“Eat what you can, Your Majesty. If battle comes, an empty stomach can be one’s greatest enemy.”

The meal had had many twists and turns, with the conversation conducted in a casual tone. Now that everyone had finished eating, the talk became graver as Maximilian asked a question:

“What is the current situation? Judging by the dead Orcs outside the walls, surely their forces must be crippled.”

Erhim Kiringer, having read the reports, shook his head. “The monsters are attacking every other day. Eight attacks have been fielded against the castle, and out of these, all had consisted of more than five-hundred Orcs.

Maximilian ran the math through his head.

“In that case, about four thousand of the things have died by now. The report talked about a force of sixteen thousand, which means that twelve thousand are left.” Ehrim’s face brightened at hearing these numbers. The humans had six thousand warriors at their disposal after the reinforcements had arrived. They had the advantage of an excellent position, with open fields of fire existing before the walls. Surely the Orcs were doomed.

The world did not always conform to such simple rules, though, and Ehrim’s hopes were soon dashed.

“There has been no decrease in the number of enemies we face,” the First Prince said as he wiped apple sauce from his face by using his sleeve. “In actual fact, their number have been steadily increasing since they had first besieged us.”

Vincent, Count Balahard’s eldest son, stood now to further inform the newcomers as to direness of the threat they faced.

“Our scouts have identified nine distinct Orcish corps that can be fielded. That is, there are eigtheen thousand Orcs seeking our end in the mountains.”

At hearing this figure, Maximilian spat out the wad of rice that he had thoughtfully been chewing on.

* * *

The after-dinner meeting did not last long. The true strategic council was held the following day as the state of affairs was analyzed in greater depth. The name of Warlord was mentioned plenty of times during the council, yet Maximilian and Ehrim still struggled to believe in the concept of an Orcish king. Something surprised the Second Prince even more, though. Every time the commander of Winter Castle wanted someone to mediate a petty dispute or suggest the final course of action, they looked to a single person whose authority they held to be absolute.

It was who this person was that surprised the Second Prince. It was not the Count, nor his elder son. No, they all looked toward the First Prince for guidance. The soldiers might not have guessed it, and even a few of the commanders in the room might have been oblivious. Yet to Maximilian, it was all too clear: His brother was in charge of this meeting, and this fact told him that he needed to be more aware of his sibling's actions and general nature.

Yet, as Maximilian studied Adrian, he studied Maximilian in turn.

* * *

When I had first seen the Second Prince through the eyes of the First, I had been surprised, for he resembled a friend I had known when I was a child. No, it wasn't just his appearance, but his character as well: Righteous and gentle, yet with a strong and unbroken will. It was definitely not a reincarnation, though, for there were differences.

Maximilian had been born into a bloodline of iron-blooded monarchs; he had practically been born with a sword in his hand. I now understood better why the king had exiled his son, for compared to such a shining rose of a handsome man, Adrian had surely been nothing more than a thorn in the royal arse. It was an action I understood, but in no way agreed with. There was a difference between an army that merely kept the peace within a country and an army that marched boldly off to war to reclaim that which their people had once lost.

What this kingdom needed right now was a cattle rustler, not a wise old king ruling

over the sheep in his pen.

I state this due to the recent rise of the Greenskin King, and that evil fay elf who relentlessly stalked my thoughts. In the future, well, many more unpleasant evil things might choose to crawl from their holes and threaten all that was good within this realm. I guessed one could describe this as the advent of the turbulent world.

I knew that soon the fence of the kraal would be sundered. Wolves wearing the faces of sheep would appear among the flock with open arms and empty promises. The sheep would be ravaged and consumed, their once verdant pastures becoming nothing but barren wastelands.

This era, this turmoil could not be faced through wit and logic alone. No, what the kingdom needed now was a wolf who wore the sheep's mask, not to butcher the flock, but to turn each and every sheep into a ravening lion in service of justice and righteous war.

I was in Adrian's body. I was a watcher who observed so many countless wars and horrors that stalked the land.

And Adrian…

Adrian was the harbinger of peace, a man with a blazing sword who went to war in order to end it.

CHAPTER 55
THERE WAS NO BROTHER WITH ONLY BROTHERS (1)

The council we held on the following day started off with questions about the Warlord. Was there really such a thing as a King of the Orcs? Had anyone ever sighted it, and wasn't it merely a very cunning and fierce Orc rather than a monarch in its own right? Both the commanders of Winter Castle, as well as those of the reinforcing army, looked at me expectantly.

"A great spear tore through these walls, a spear hurled by a single being. This spear was hurled by the Warlord, right from where he was in the mountains."

Almost at the same time when I had plunged my blade through the heart of the Orc noble, his master had thrust the thing at our defenses. That very spear was still within the castle courtyard, as a testament to the might of the foe that we now faced. "That is the power this King of the Orcs possesses," I told all those gathered within the room. "A tattered letter had been attached to this spear, giving word to the Warlord's challenge."

The commander of the reinforcements, as well as the second prince, could not hide their doubts. "But the range for such a throw… impossible, all the way from the mountains!" the commander sputtered.

"Indeed, how do we know it did was not simply fired from a ballista?" Maximilian voiced his doubts in turn. "These monsters are known to operate siege weapons, so that seems the likelier origin of the breach."

I stared at them intently. "You do not take my word for it? Believe what you will. Regardless of the truth you choose, the mere fact that they breached the defenses proves that these are no normal monsters.

Some of the commanders seemed to be convinced by my summation of things. "If you still don't believe me, brother, return to the capital. We need able reinforcements here, not a bunch of inquisitors who only get in our way."

The murmuring and general commotion in the room fell silent after I had uttered this challenge. One commander now stood up, bowing to me.

“I did not mean to doubt your word, First Prince Adrian. I merely wished to confirm the truth behind such an amazing tale. I apologize if my presumptions had been disrespectful,” he said, his tone sincere. I recognized this man, for his face had been burned into my memory.

Was he not Ehrim Kiringer, a Wire Knight? Despite the fact that he wore the uniform of a mercenary, I knew that it was indeed him.

No one spoke once he had sat down. “Very well, let us all take a break. We shall re-convene and discuss matters in an hour from now.”

The commanders of Winter Castle followed their Count as he made his departure. The commanders of the relief force also rose.

I was heading out myself, but someone took me by the arm. “Brother,” was all that Maximilian said as I sat back down beside him.

He stared intently at me.

“What exactly is the nature of this Warlord?” He asked in all sincerity.

“His name is simply how I call him: The King of the Orcs, who has united all the Orc tribes into one large force. He is a vile, violent, and unbelievably mighty monster,” I summarized as he regarded me with a frown.

“Well, aren’t the Gori Knights also monsters that cannot be handled?” I shook my head at his predictable response. Those of Winter Castle believed me fully by now, for had they not heard the roar of the Warlord from the mouth of the Night Slayer? Obviously, these newest arrivals to the north would need some more convincing. I only hoped that they could be convinced before their ignorance led to their downfall. It was a moot point. These newcomers would find out soon enough.

Even feeling a sliver of the Warlord’s power would convince anyone of his reality, even if they hated the fact that they believed it. There were many wondrous and terrible things in this world, and one of them was to be found within the Blade’s Edge Mountains. Our day of meeting this fell beast would be soon at hand, this I knew.

“Well…” the Second Prince finally said, wishing to change the subject.”What was the Night Slayer then? Tell me more of the battles you have fought, and the current situation the fortress.”

These things had already been discussed in the prior meeting, yet I could still see my brother harboring some doubts. I summoned up every reserve of patience within me as I explained everything to him again. Somehow, after once more hearing the tales, the Second Prince was still confused. “It is said that you have been the first to notice the presence of this Warlord. How did you come to know of his nature, this monster that no man alive knows of?”

I gave a nonchalant shrug. “I have always been interested in ancient tales, brother.”

Maximilian nodded, seeming to believe me fully. Everyone in the kingdom knew about the fat little boy who had stolen the Founding King’s sword and then fell on it. The rumors of my use of a Mana Heart then also spread, and everyone decided that the fat little prince had gone a bit insane and lost himself in the legends of the Founding King, Gruhorn Leonberger. It was expected of me to know such archaic yarns, then.

“You must have read many old books,” the Second Prince said, clearly deep in thought about something. He finally got up, and I followed him outside.

Our Uncle was waiting for us. “Would you be able to keep this up?” He asked me.

“What are you talking about, Uncle?” I asked, yet he could see through my pretense. I knew that he referred to the manner in which I had become the de-facto leader of the meetings, even if I did not wish to admit it.

“You keep doing amazing deeds,” he replied with a laugh. “Thanks to all your accomplishments in our defense, everyone knows how important you have become to the people of Balahard. You also know the most of this… Warlord. It is only right that you head our meetings.”

There was something else, though. Vincent had been the one to deal with the large and small affairs of Winter Castle while dealing with our royal reinforcements had been left solely in my hands. It almost felt as if the Count was preparing himself to vacate the seat of power.

“I thought we had faced an impossible foe, and that we had become greedy and soft-

bellied. Yet now, I see a road that can be taken through the chaos," he stated, his voice gentle yet dripping with power. "As Knight Commander, I will take the fight to this Warlord. I do not wish to die in my bed, I am the protector of the north!" he continued, his body trembling. "Yet, I could not face the Night Slayer on my own, so my chances against the warlord… hah." He once more gave a hearty laugh.

"Why laugh, Uncle? It seems that you are desperate in some way."

"No, Adrian, thank you for showing me the way. I know what I must do in these, the last years of my life. Vincent still lacks in many things, yet I am gladdened by the fact that you are here for him."

Why was this man saying all these things? I ran my hand through my hair, uncertain as to the thread the conversation. Suddenly my Uncle placed his hand on my shoulder and stared at something behind me. It was Maximilian, who quickly looked the other way.

"Your brother seems very interested in you," came Count Balahard's parting words.

* * *

The second session of the meeting had ended in a flash. Even if Maximilian doubted my word, those who had followed him from the capital clearly did not. My brother only countered me on one point the entire time.

"If you split the corps into so many different units, how can they be effective as a cohesive fighting force?" Ehrim echoed the Second Prince's doubts after I had laid out the nature of our deployment.

"There is no doubt that your force is filled with veteran and elite warriors, yet it can't be denied that they lack actual battle experience against the monsters we'll be facing. This type of arrangement is the most effective strategy against their kind," Vincent cut in.

I had another reason for this division of forces: I could not trust officers who had never faced Orcs to lead large groups of men. Splitting the reinforcements meant that any ineptitude and bad tactical decisions would not be that devastating, occurring on a squad level rather than that of an entire platoon.

"Still, the reason for our coming here yet remains unclear," one of the commanders

voiced his discontent openly.

I sighed. The amount of controversy and petty squabbling was only increasing in the meeting. I knew the leaders of Winter Castle to be stalwart and competent men. If they had not been, the kingdom would have long ago fallen to hordes of monsters. These men still had their flaws, though: They were not used to fighting alongside foreign forces, and they possessed little if any political savvy. They gave little consideration to their new allies; no, they could only think about how to more effectively cull monsters. I decided to make things clear to the newcomers.

“This will be your first battle against Orcs. The stench of these things is overwhelming, their rushing tides of warriors, relentless. On flat ground they will charge at you and hunt you down to a man. When a wall stands in their way, they will pile their corpses to its very top just to be able to close with their foe. Are you still willing to fight?”

Ehrim Kiringer was about to respond to my challenge, but my brother’s voice came first. “I will fight. We will fight.”

I admired his attitude. He and his men would understand soon enough, once they experienced their first battle against these beasts. It only harmed our cause if we squabbled among one another now. “However, I think it wise if only one corps is divided to bolster the forces on the walls. I suggest the second corps remains intact, acting as a reserve force. We should be prepared for every eventuality,” the Second Prince suggested, giving voice to his true opinion.

His suggestion was strategically sound. Most commanders in the royal capital fell to their knees to appease every whim of the King, so I was pleasantly surprised by Maximilian’s sound grasp of strategy. There was no place for unimaginative milksops in the harshness of winter.

“Let’s do as the Second Prince suggests,” Vincent stated in an embarrassed tone. Some of the royal commanders shifted awkwardly at this.

“Today’s meeting has come to an end,” the Count declared. Maximilian and a few of the royal commanders were surprised upon hearing this, for they had expected a long term plan, especially as to how to deal with the Warlord.

“Aren’t we going to discuss future strategies?” Ehrim asked.

“We can discuss such things after you have faced your first battle,” my Uncle stated with finality.

He knew that discussing such grand schemes with men who had never looked into the eyes of an Orc would bear no fruit. Despite being a little bit offended, the reinforcements did not voice any displeasure. In fact, they all seemed determined to prove themselves in the battles to come. Some of them even seemed impatient at the prospect. Their wish was fulfilled soon enough, for whilst the royal troops were still busy being organized into their new units, a trumpet sounded throughout the castle.

I had been observing the deployment of our new forces, yet immediately sprang into action when I heard the trumpet’s call. Maximilian was next to me. “It’s time for your practice round,” I told him, and his face hardened at this. I walked up the stairs at a leisurely pace as my brother, and the royal commanders followed me. “Aren’t you supposed to hurry?” the Second Prince asked me, aghast at the fact that I was strolling as if nothing was awry. I did not deign to answer him.

“It’s too quiet,” Ehrim Kiringer stated, for, after the call of the horn, silence had descended over Winter Castle. As we turned a corner, I simply said: “Not for long.” Hundreds of Rangers were already lined up on the walls, each standing ready with a bow or crossbow. Their commanders were also present. “They were just waiting,” I told Ehrim.

Cheers erupted all along the battlements as the men saw me.

“Rangers! Today we listen to our bows as if they are our own mothers!”

“We walk the road of resistance, brothers!”

The Rangers stamped their boots and weapons upon the ground, the walls echoing as they moved as one man.

Then, a roar from afar was heard as the dark green invaders gave mouth to their own foul battle cries. I looked at Ehrim and my brother with a twinkle in my eyes.

“Welcome to the real face of Winter Castle.”

The feeling of excitement was palpable in the air around us.

I took a huge breath as my heart was set ablaze at the prospect of battle.

CHAPTER 56
THERE WAS NO BROTHER WITH ONLY BROTHERS (2)

The Orcs were trying to gain the walls through every means at their disposal. Maximilian had already been near one of the beasts as he looked into its sickly yellow eyes and saw its scaly, green hide.

I only had eyes for the state of our defense of the walls.

“Fire! Keep on firing!” Vincent commanded his Rangers. All along the walls, soldiers were severing the ropes of siege hooks and deflecting thrown axes. “Don’t allow a single one to gain the walls!” Bellowed a knight, who was covered in chunks of Orcish flesh and blood.

Maximilian retched as the stench of burning oil, sweat, and the monster’s viscera assaulted his senses. He was nauseous, and the strange scents had jumbled his thought processes. I quickly grabbed him by the shoulder and wrenched him to the side as a whistling, wayward ax struck the spot where he had been standing just a second ago.

“Don’t stand in the open, brother! You’ll be killed within seconds!” I calmly said to him, clucking my tongue. His confusion subsided upon hearing a voice so at odds with the chaos around him. He struggled to take in a breath, clearly shocked at how fast life passed into death against such beasts. “You stand out, brother, they target your frilly clothes.”

He studied the Rangers upon the walls, everyone wearing fur over their leather armor. His armor and its golden luster shone in the midst of such tawny garbs. “Thank you…” he managed to sputter.

“If you die, the fervor of the Orcs rise, and as they gain more fervor, their attacks become more persistent,” I instructed him. I could see he thought I was concerned about his safety, but that was not my intention. No, the truth of the matter was that he was in our way. He dropped his head in shame as he realized this, but only for a

moment, for soon, he raised his head and tightened his grip upon his sword. Gone was his shock and surprise at the ferocity of the Orcs. All he cared about now was how to kill them more effectively.

“Sir Ehrim!”

“Yes, Your Majesty?” The knight said as he came to the Second Prince’s side, already having guessed at his intention as he motioned for soldiers and knights to ascend to the wall. Before they could even ascend, though, I commanded them to a halt.

“Don’t come up! We’re crowded here already, no use in limiting our sphere of movement!” Maximilian saw the wisdom of my order as he studied our crowded lines. He allowed only the Wire Knights to ascend the stairs, then, and they dispersed themselves among the infantry and the Rangers.

“Long time no see, Your Majesty! The day is good!” One of the Wire Knights cheerfully called to me as he ran to his appointed spot.

More of them greeted me in this cheeky manner as they deployed.

“It’s been a long time!” A burly man shouted at Maximilian after he had split the skull of a charging Orc.

“Sir Dunham?” exclaimed the Second Prince.

“That’s me, Max! You’re looking spiffy as ever, I see,” Dunham said with a laugh as he cut into the rope of a siege hook. An Orc still clung to the iron hook itself. In one motion, the man severed its fingers, with the beast plunging to the ground while shouting in a terrifying manner.

Maximilian continued to study the deployment of the Wire Knights along the battlefield. Their participation in the battle had strengthened the lines, and the prospects of mounting an effective defense had improved at once. The insane Rangers themselves held the walls by blade and bow, slashing at Orcs who came too near and then switching to their ranged weapons once they got the chance.

“Ready… Fire!” Came Vincent’s command once more as the rangers fired into the mass of Orcs in unison. Many Orcs were felled by this hail of bolt and arrow, yet more stormed at the wall as their comrades were mowed down. I could not even make an accurate guess as to what their numbers were.

“There are about a thousand Orcs,” Ehrim stated as if having read my thoughts. He himself had a thousand men under his command. How many Orcs would storm our walls in the battles to come?

Maximilian had gotten used to the clamor of the battle by now. He deflected a thrown javelin with his sword, saving a Ranger’s life, then cut into the rope of a siege hook. Whenever an Orc’s head appeared over the walls, Maximilian kicked the thing until it fell back. He kept himself busy in this fashion for a while until a strange feeling washed over him.

As he looked around, he noticed that not a single Winter Knight remained upon the walls. “The knights have gathered in front of the gate!” Ehrim informed him, and the Second Prince saw that it was so. Even while the Orcs still came wave after wave against the ramparts, the knights had grabbed their swords and spears.

In front of them stood Adrian, the First Prince. Maximilian had been surprised when his brother had stopped hacking at Orcs and departed the walls, yet now he understood Adrian’s intentions better. He wished to open the gates and launch a counter-attack on the foe.

Maximilian had known that his brother and the men of Winter Castle were all a bit crazy, yet the nature of their madness was truly greater than he had at first surmised. The Orcs were massing along the walls in ever greater numbers. Then… the sound of pulleys and the grinding of heavy iron resonated amongst the venue. Upon seeing this, the Orcs, who were clamoring at the walls, changed their tact and headed for the newly opened gates, roaring their battle lust like never before. A quiet yet persistent sound became audible over the howling of the beasts:

“Silent are the snowy mountain peaks and the blood-drenched walls.”

This was a martial chant that the Rangers had sung when they had led Maximilian and his troops to the fortress. Now, however, the words were calmly spoken and not sung in a discordant pitch. The Second Prince had not expected this.

“Only our horns of war are heard, for a new day dawns into which we advance.”

Strange energy started to permeate the winter air after these words had been spoken. It felt like every soul could hear the words of the song so very clearly. The ranger’s rapid breathing misted the air, and their eyes shone with bright

anticipation.

“Silent are the snowy mountain peaks and the blood-drenched walls!

Only our horns of war are heard, for a new day dawns into which we advance!”

This now came from the knights, who roared the song where the Rangers had almost whispered it. It was then that Maximilian felt the power of mana flow through the air as knights activated their rings.

“Your Majesty! Protect yourself magically!” Ehrim warned the Second Prince. Maximilian raised his own mana, as well as all the Wire Knights, who still fought upon the walls. A strange energy slammed into them, and if they had not activated their rings, they would have perished.

What the hell was that? Maximilian knew Orcs had shamans and practiced strange witcheries, yet he had never expected such a force. Potentialities flashed through his head.

The Rangers now took up the song in full, their voices ringing across the walls in a wild modulation. At that moment, the knights below roared.

“Charge! Charge! Charge!”

Maximilian watched as Adrian lead the charge, a blue flame burning brightly on the tip of his sword. This was the first time the Second Prince had ever seen such a display of blazing swordsmanship. A golden flash spread through the knights as they summoned auras into their swords.

The knights met with the Orcs, and such was the force of the mana-fueled charge that the beasts were thrust screaming into the air. The Knights of Winter dug into that gap, storming into the Orcish lines in a well-executed wedge formation. At the head of this wedge, the blue flame burned brightly as the limbs of Orcs were amputated left and right. Those Orcs who fell were soon trampled underfoot by the charging knights.

The Orcs gave voice to their anger and fear while the knights roared their hatred for the vile beasts.

Maximilian could only gawk blankly at the scene below him, especially as he saw the

boy who was his brother chop and hack like a madman through Orc after Orc.

“Oh, my God…” Was all that the Second Prince could say.

He now knew that the nobles in the royal capital had deprecated the might of the Balahards and the martial prowess of Adrian out of petty spite. These nobles were foppish, brutish incompetents who wouldn’t be able to catch a single goblin in a barrel.

Maximilian got goosebumps at this realization and the sight before him. The Winter Knight’s decimation of wave upon wave of that dark green ocean impressed him, as well as seeing the true nature of his brother.

Orcs were starting to flee in all directions as the knights pressed them. The Wire Knights themselves stared at the scene with jaws slack in surprise. The Orcs along the walls heard the hue and cry of their comrades and also started to flee. The Rangers, still giving voice to the song, opened fire into the backs of these fleeing beasts. Heavily Armed infantry, about a hundred of them, now poured out of the gates and joined the knights in their relentless slaughter.

“Orders, Your Majesty?” Ehrim Kiringer asked as he approached his prince. Maximilian gritted his teeth, knowing he had to put up a brave face. He relaxed his facial musculature into an impassive mask.

“We’re going,” he said with a trembling voice, his blood starting to boil. “The men are done for, Your Majesty,” Ehrim replied in all seriousness. Maximilian studied the forces upon the walls and saw that the knight did not speak falsely. The Wire Knights were panting heavily after their defense, and the Second Prince wondered how such a brief battle could’ve left them so worn-out and exhausted.

What difference was there between the Wire Knights and the Winter Knights? The knights of Winter Castle had fought throughout the battle and still fought on, while the Wire Knights had come in as the reserve and now stood panting upon the battlements like hounds spent on the hunt. The Second Prince could not find rhyme nor reason in this observation of his. He chewed his lip as he returned his attention to the battle outside the walls.

The knights and heavy infantry were by now openly hunting the Orcs who had scattered in their flight. In no time at all, the battle had come to an end.

“Victory is ours!” Declared Adrian for all to hear as he raised a bloody banner high into the sky. His gaze settled on his brother, and Adrian laughed. Maximilian could not laugh or cry; all he could do was blankly stare at his older brother as he stood tall among piles and piles of dead Orcs.

There were some, however, who evinced greater surprise than the Second Prince.

“What in all the hells just happened?” This came from one of the senior mercenaries of the Silver Fox Corps, for they had all been enchanted by the sight they had seen through the open gates. The battle was done and dusted, and across the field of slaughter, there marched a boy who held the Orc’s banner high, marching toward them like a triumphal general of old. The boy laughed as he approached them, sending out a soldier as a messenger before him.

“His Majesty the First Prince requests your personal presence after the battlefield has been cleared,” the soldier said with a stern face, taking his part-time job as royal herald very seriously. The captain of the Silver Foxes merely nodded, finding no reason to object to the prince’s command.

“Vincent, I won! I counted nineteen,” Adrian said as he reached the eldest son of the Count. “Hah, I’m on twenty-six, so you’re still far away from me,” Vincent stated imperiously. “Yeah, but you cheated with a bow. You know, now that I count again, I actually got twenty-eight.”

“If you count that way, well, then I got thirty-five, so give me that banner.”

The two young boys and their joking quarrel were just as it appeared: Two youths in their prime having some fun. Well, they would look innocent if one disregarded the blood and viscera that was spattered all over their armor.

“This is far different than what I had expected,” the captain of the Silver Foxes muttered.

During all of this, Maximilian continued to study his brother.

CHAPTER 57
EVEN IN THE WINTER WITH THE SNOWSTORM (1)

Adrian and Vincent continued to joke around, the knights and Rangers crowding around them.

“Ah, Vincent my friend, I am tired and dying and yet you stick me in the back like this?” Adrian joked, eliciting laughter from the knights.

“Oooh, a few years ago we wouldn’t even have you here, you’d be stuffing your gob with meal after meal somewhere!”

“Hah, you’re just mad because you have tired of killing Orcs, Vincent!”

Soldiers soon joined in the mockery, and Maximilian was astounded that his brother so freely joked around with their kind. It was generally frowned upon for royalty to cavort with the peasantry like some common farmhands. Still, the scene was not that shocking, for, despite the mocking and booing of the soldiers, they still regarded Adrian with deep respect and utter courtesy.

“You guys who only shoot arrows from the walls, you didn’t win this battle, now did you?” Adrian piped up, eliciting even more booing from the soldiers.

This soon ended, and the Rangers and soldiers went about their duties as they trundled corpse carts onto the battlefield to collect the fallen. The knights also returned to their posts. Maximilian regarded his brother, deep in thought. If the nobles of the royal court saw Adrian now, his armor full of blood while he cavorted with the common soldiery, they would have rebuked him for exhibiting behavior not befitting royalty.

One half of Maximilian agreed with this; the other did not.

“Your Majesty,” Ehrim Kiringer said to him then. “I am glad the battle has turned out well. I am honored to have fought by your side.”

Conventional words for an unconventional situation, and upon hearing them, a new feeling washed over the Second Prince, one that he could name due to being an intelligent person. Boldness.

The Wire Knights before him had the look of fathers praising their sons. He had seen this look of admiration many times before and almost blushed at it. He was fifteen, so being praised for his boldness by men far older than he was a good thing. His brother was a year older than him, yet Adrian was seen in even a better light by the soldiers. This fact brought some shame to Maximilian, for he had just swung his sword around while Adrian had been the true hero.

“Your Majesty?” Came Ehrim’s voice, shaking him from his reverie.

“Do you have something on your mind?” Maximilian asked the knight, unable to meet his eyes. “If Your Majesty would allow it, I wish to go down and greet His Majesty, the First Prince. Maximilian nodded, and the Wire Knights soon surrounded Adrian.

“Oh, now you pretend to be close to me,” the First Prince mocked, though his expression was welcoming. The knights almost giggled at this.

“Did you come here as volunteers?” Adrian asked, curious as to why the knights had not donned their armor and heraldry.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” one of them answered.

“Why did you volunteer?” Maximilian asked of Ehrim, who had once more joined his side.

“Patience, Your Majesty,” the deputy commander said, smiling.

“It just surprised me.” Even the scene he now saw surprised him.

The kingdom was enjoying a time of peace, yet the threat of Orcs in the north was not to be scoffed at. If left unchecked, they would destroy the kingdom in their hordes. Here, in this war, the heir of Leonberger had rooted and grown into a great tree. People said that a bad reputation was an impossible thing to remedy. Everyone had decided that Adrian’s existence was harmful and that he was to be avoided. Could they have imagined that he would be lauded as a hero in the north?

A question arose in Maximilian’s mind. Why had his brother, now so handsome,

pretended to be stupid and allowed himself to be stigmatized? If he had even been a tenth of the man he was now, would the nobles of the royal court not have looked upon him with more respect? Would His Majesty the King still have hated his eldest son as he hated him now?

Maximilian couldn't figure out why his brother had been as he had been. Maximilian closed his eyes. Only by watching and waiting would he find his answer.

* * *

I relished the chance to war against the Orcs, yet my pathetic body still hindered me. Mana was depleted almost immediately, and my muscles tired so quickly. I maintained a strong face before the soldiers, yet the fact was that my limits were soon reached. Right now, I just wanted to go lie down in my bed, yet there was still work to be done. I beckoned the mercenary leaders over. They had been awaiting this signal and approached me with bowed heads.

"Shall we find a private place to talk?"

"Our barracks are quiet," the captain of the Silver Foxes said.

I nodded and followed them, arriving at their quarters some time afterward.

"Please, enter," the captain said as he held his tent flap open for me. Unlike the shabby exterior of the tent, the inside was lavishly decorated and surprisingly spacious. He beckoned to two of his underlings. "Both of you, make sure no one disturbs us in here."

I had not even instructed him to do it – the fact that he did showed that he was a man with a sharp eye and an organized mind. In short, a man worthy of being a mercenary. "It is my honor to welcome you to my humble abode, Your Majesty. I am named Antoine, the leader of the Silver Foxes."

"Did you sign a contract with the royal family?" I asked him straight of the bat.

"Yes, a long term contract, for a period of one year. I can renew it if the battle here is prolonged."

"And your plans after that?"

“Same as always. How can a mercenary truly make plans, if he does not know when he will die? If we are fortunate to survive this, we’ll just move on to the next employer,” he stated with a shrug.

“Are you willing to enter a contract with me, Antoine?”

“Since we have already been hired by the royal line of Leonberger, what difference will a contract with Your Majesty make?”

He knew what I had meant, yet he had feigned ignorance to probe my intent.

“It means entering a contract with me personally, not the royal family.”

“Well, even if we might appear to be a bunch of uncouth gangsters, our rates are not cheap.”

He had confirmed one thing to me at least: They had been hired by my father to support the north. I had expected as much.

I did not have enough funds to hire these men. I received a small stipend toward my upkeep, and this amount was far too little to buy an army.

One did not need just coin to buy things, however. “Your mana is collected and stored in a very crude manner,” I told Antoine then.

“I can improve your techniques, your entire corps’ technique. At times an intangible reward is far greater than a material one. Antoine and his officers had decent amounts of mana, yet their employment of it was crude at best. They would never reach the next level, and I guessed he himself was a sword expert at best. I considered all my mana reserves as well as the power of my poetry. I knew then that I would reward these men with my poetry as the price, and as we burned countless Orcs, I would share more and more of the power that came into my Mana Heart. I demonstrated my gift to the captain of the Silver Foxes, then.

All the furniture in the tent began to shake, and the cutlery began to rattle. A teacup trembled as tea flowed from its side, and the mercenary banner began to flutter despite the lack of wind. I controlled my powers once more, and everything that had been shaking settled down.

“Would such a reward be enough?” I asked Antoine, who regarded me with an

unreadable expression. I waited patiently.

Anyone who accumulated mana in Mana Hearts could store tremendous amounts of power within them. This man had seen my prowess in battle, and he knew that he could only emulate my techniques if he and his men employed their mana in a purer manner.

“If words alone won battles, I would have been a sword master long ago,” the mercenary captain finally said. Was he going to reject me? Even if he did, I merely had to find another army. Antoine grabbed my hand.

“I always judge a client by how they speak to me. I have heard Your Majesty’s words oh-so-clearly,” he said while grinning, yet his eyes remained grim. “Can you gift me a title?”

It was too much to demand from a prince, yet his words reminded me that there could be quite a pleasant future planned for both of us. I laughed, for Antoine was an interesting person. Unlike the honest and, at times, dull knights, this man knew how to sell himself and how to use others to reach his own goals.

“How long will you contract with us?” he finally asked.

“Until I become king,” I answered without hesitation.

* * *

We agreed upon a verbal contract there and then. He was studying me all the while, and I could not guess at his thoughts. Nevertheless, I was certain that this sly leader of the Silver Foxes would prove to be of great use to me. “Do you know how to use your Mana Hearts?” I asked of him.

He did not speak; instead, he drew both the sword and the dagger that was sheaved along his waist. I could feel his mana flowing as he twirled the weapons in his hands. “The sword which cleaves the dagger!” he whispered as he clashed his two weapons against one another, the glowing sword seeming to pass through the dagger. “This is the song of the sword.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“We sing the song that the sword itself sings.”

I was stunned by his response. His face shone with pride, and I then recognized the song he had sung. It was “The blade that cuts the knife”, a song written by a well-known mercenary leader. This man clearly knew many poems.

I was becoming madder and madder.

CHAPTER 58
EVEN IN THE WINTER WITH THE SNOWSTORM (2)

“Doesn’t the same power count for all swords?” I asked Antoine, who nodded as if he had expected the question. “There is a difference in output and efficiency, but swords act more or less the same regardless of their wielder.”

“You are truly mad,” I told him, my head spinning. What happened to poems of grace and beauty which inspired glorious dances? Where did those seekers who desired to reach transcendence go?

Crude and bawdy verses were all that remained from the glorious ages of yore. “Is there something you dislike about it?” Antoine dared to ask me, still seated. I did not answer him, even if he had read my reaction correctly. Instead, I asked him about the origins of his sword poem, and the answer he gave me was truly spectacular.

“I learned, and bought it from a veteran mercenary when I had still been young. Well, I didn’t just learn it, no, I gave my all to truly understand it.”

His answer left me speechless, for I had not imagined that there existed a trade-in karmic poems within the world, yet here was a guy who was a testament to such dealings. Here, in front of my very eyes. Truly, these were interesting times. I had never encountered cases of people buying karma and mana from one another. I knew that, at times, monarchs would reward their knights with poems after years of dedication and service. This was the exception to the rule, though, and occurred under a set of stringent conditions. The recipient of these poems had to contribute their own verses as well. In doing this, it was ensured that the transfer of the poem was as painless and bloodless as possible.

It came as no surprise then that knights never sold their poetry in exchange for coin or anything else, for they saw such a trade as the ultimate manner in which to degrade and sully the nature of a poem.

Yet, the evidence of such a trade sat before me.

“The blade that cuts the knife,” I muttered. Even that single verse was once part of a complete poem. As it had been passed from one unqualified mouth to the other, much of its meaning and therefore its power had been lost. Its original form had been corrupted.

The only reason that it still held power, I decided, was due to the fact that it was such a simple verse.

I clucked my tongue.

“I have been trying to perfect it for half a year now, barely having touched its surface. I had invested my entire fortune in this song. Seeing as it has saved my sorry hide a few times now, I would say that it was a fortune well spent.”

The mercenary’s gums had flapped too much for his own good. Upon hearing his words, I realized how close I had come to being ripped off. “The particulars of our contract have just changed,” I told him. His mouth snapped shut, and his eyes slowly widened. “Twenty years,” was all I said. No longer would he serve me until I became king, no, now he and his company would be bound to me for a full two decades.

“Twenty years is an impossibility, that’s almost for life in our line of work. No mercenary would accept such terms,” he said, strongly against my reneging upon our previous agreement. I scoffed at his refusal and drew my sword.

“Well now, Your Majesty!” Antoine exclaimed in amazement as he jumped from his chair and retreated from me. “Is it true that you have been seeking your poem for half a year now?” I asked as I stared into his eyes. “You just told me that you had spent all your coin on it.”

Antoine’s expression changed at this. “How much of your life have you truly wasted on that sloppy excuse for a poem?”

I could see the hesitation in his eyes, so I started to recite a part of [Poetry of True Soul]:

“I piled up green carcasses, raising myself a mountain!

Red streams flowed from it, as bloody nails.

I honor your soul before this mountain of mine!”

At once, a blue flame flowed over my blade, and my blade hovered near the banner of the Silver Foxes. “How much is this poem worth?” I asked Antoine in the next moment bringing the tip of my sword so very near his throat. “Is it worth a measly twenty years?”

He gulped audibly. “Give me time to consider your offer,” he finally said.

I sheathed my sword. “Make up your mind, mercenary. I won’t wait long.”

I swiveled around and left his tent. I knew that I had him hooked, for there had been a deep longing in his eyes when he had seen my blue flaming blade. The treasure he had hunted so long and was so proud to have acquired paled in comparison to what I had offered him. I knew he would eventually come to my side, for the true prize he sought had been offered to him on a golden platter.

In my mind’s eye, I now saw the fortress and its mighty walls. I then stretched my imagination out further, to the mountain range beyond and the terrible thing that existed within it. Even the auras of all the living beings near me paled in comparison to the terrible presence of the Warlord. He had not made a move these past two months, only roaring from time to time in order to remind us of his existence. I wondered why he had not yet come to me, seeing it as good fortune that I had been given time to prepare. Yet, time was temporal, never infinite. The Warlord was a conquering tyrant, not a benevolent king who ruled idly over a prosperous realm. I did not know when, yet I was certain that my nemesis would make a move. He would finally reach me and Winter Castle.

Before that, I had to prepare myself in every way that I could.

* * *

As soon as the new day dawned, I went to Vincent and asked whether he could spare me some rangers. I needed about three to six men who knew the mountains well and knew how to track their prey. “I see you do not have your usual retinue with you today, Your Majesty,” he dared to state.

“Yes, that is because I wish to conduct a reconnaissance mission today,” I said. “I’m going to hunt,” I added upon seeing his puzzlement.

Not only Orcs called the Blade’s Edge Mountains home, for many larger and smaller monsters were also to be found against its slopes and within its caves. Ogres were

far stronger than Orcs, and these beasts were at times called the Lords of the Mountains, just as trolls are known as immortal predators. These ogres were notorious even in the Gwangyeong area, where great knights had plied their trade four-hundred years ago.

“I’m going to hunt myself some ogres,” I told Vincent.

“It’s too dangerous, especially so deep into winter with our foe so near,” Vincent hurriedly said, trying to thwart my intentions. “If something were to happen to Your Majesty, the damage to our defensive capabilities would be dire indeed.”

I sensed some dissemblance on his part, for he had warned me in such a fashion before. “You said exactly the same thing when I headed out to quash the scouting force, and how did I deal with them?” I asked him with a winning smile.

“In that case, I’ll send some extra people,” he acceded with a sigh.

I did not protest at this, for a few additional warriors would not make much of a difference. When the time for our departure came, we were joined by others. One man, I knew immediately as Ehrim Kiringer.

“Why are you here, then?” I demanded of him.

“I was sent here by His Majesty the Second Prince,” he said, clearly not happy that he, as a knight, had been sent to climb a rough mountain.

“I offer myself as well,” said a knight who named himself as Dunham Fahrenheit, his face covered by scars after so many years as a Wire Knight.

“Do as you please,” I told the men as they tightened the straps on their packs and fell in line. I inspected our baggage once more, knowing that my quest could keep us in the mountains for an entire month. As we were packing the last of our things, another group of men appeared. It was Antoine and two of his mercenaries.

“You wish to follow me as well?” I asked him, but he shook his head and gestured at his two comrades, who bowed respectfully toward me.

They were big guys. “This is Jean and Locke. Both are veterans,” Antoine said, frowning at the formal manner in which his men had greeted me. “They had been mountaineers before joining the Silver Fox Company. They are quick of wit and even

swifter on their feet, so I'm sure they'll be of great use to you."

After studying them for a while, I just laughed. I knew their true purpose was to act as spies for their master, just as the two knights would report to my brother. Their intentions were so blatant that I almost pitied their naivety. "Alright, be my porters and pack animals on this journey, then," I said to the men, pretending that I did not know them for the spying weasels that they were. We all hefted our packs and headed to the gate, where my Uncle and Vincent were awaiting us.

"Take care," the Count said as he regarded me with a frown. Fortunately, he only wished to see me off, and not try to persuade me from my quest as his son had attempted to do.

"Even without me, you must hold these walls," I told him earnestly.

"This castle is your legacy, and the legacy of your scions."

"Return safely, Adrian."

"I'll be back soon," I said to him, and then made my way from the castle gates.

The Rangers upon the walls were waving at us without fanfare. Our seeing-off was a plain affair, as was usual for the men of the north.

I, too, just waved my hand.

* * *

The Rangers were doing their duty well as they led us into the mountain, avoiding any signs of the Orcs. We proceeded with care, going ever deeper and ever higher. From time to time, we came upon lesser monsters or wild animals, yet these nuisances were quickly dealt with by the Rangers. "Of all the highland infantry, the Rangers of Balahard are truly the best," Ehrim Kiringer openly stated as he admired the stealthy manner in which the Rangers had exterminated two goblin scouts. So we proceeded, staying out of the way of monster patrols as much as was possible.

How many days had passed? By now, the two 'mountaineer' mercenaries were too exhausted by our accent to spy on me that much. One of our advance Rangers held up his hand, palm opened. He was calling us to silence as his finger went to his lips. I somehow knew that we had reached the thing that I had sought to reach. A great,

furious roar was heard from afar, and this only confirmed my conclusion. So horrifically terrifying was the sound that the Rangers covered their ears with their hands, while the two mercenaries were thrown onto their asses. Arwen and the Wire Knights were clearly concerned, while Adelia stuck to my side. Her face was a ghostly pale after she had heard the terrible roar. I looked past her terror and asked the Ranger something. He understood and pointed in the direction of our quarry. I dragged Adelia with me, for she had almost fainted.

I made my way to a gnarled old tree, and beyond it stretched a clearing. The smell of blood pervaded the air, prickling my nose. I saw a great hulking monster, halfway done with its meal. It is not easy to describe the meal itself, simply put: It was a fresh Orc.

The Ogre tore its prey in half, tearing through muscles that could endure a hail of arrows as if they were naught but paper. Sickly pink guts spilled onto the snow. The Ogre proceeded to stuff these intestines into its mouth, clearly savoring the offal.

Suddenly, other Orcs appeared from the other side of the clearing and soon had the Ogre surrounded. They were elite Orc Warriors, led by an Orc Noble who was a large as one and a half of his kin.

“Warriors! Have no fear!” The Orc Noble shouted as he summoned his battle fervor into his halberd, the bright red energy suffusing his blade. Upon seeing their leader summon his magic, the Orc Warriors had their spirits bolstered and rushed the Ogre all at once.

I could do nothing else than laugh, for I had a good idea as to how their reckless charge would pan out.

CHAPTER 59
EVEN IN THE WINTER WITH THE SNOWSTORM (3)

“It’s just a tad bit more vicious than we are, and a little bit bigger! Do not back down!” The Orc Noble bellowed, and his warriors responded by letting their fervor flow freely. This bravado did not diminish the strength of the Ogre, however. It swung its meaty fist into an Orc’s head, which exploded in that single punch. Another Orc went flying with a simple kick. In an instant, five Orcs lay wounded or dead around the ferocious hulk of the Ogre.

I was awed and terrified by the difference in strength between these two species of monsters. Another Orc got its head pulped as the Ogre lifted its prize to its mouth, its fat chin shaking as it tore into its meal with its jagged teeth. The Orc Warrior’s body convulsed as its upper torso was consumed.

“Oghho gho gho, ogho oghoho!” Came the terrible noise, almost a chuckle, as the Ogre continued chewing on the corpse. The Orc Warriors who were still charging at it stopped dead in their tracks. The Orc Noble now charged at the monster, his halberd aflame with red energies. The Ogre flung its chew toy to one side as it prepared to meet this new threat. The Noble Orc came rushing on, dodging the corpse that had so casually been chucked at it. The halberd came down, and the Ogre swung its fist. Flesh met iron, yet the halberd just bounced off, so hard was the Ogre’s hide. The Orc Noble took control of his weapon, rotating it in a half-turn as the Ogre swung its fist once more. The halberd thrust past the arm into the Ogre’s armpit, yet once more, the weapon failed to penetrate the rugged skin, even with the power of the Orc’s fervor strengthening the blade.

Only a slight lesion, a minor swelling, could be seen where the halberd’s blade had fallen.

The Ogre had by now become angry, swinging at its foe in a berserk rage. The Orc Noble dodged these attacks at a dizzying speed. I admired the fact that he still managed to channel his fervor while executing his defensive movements. By observing him, I knew that he possessed greater skill than the Orc Noble I had killed.

His skill with the halberd was superb, and his application of battle fervor subtle.

Suffice it to say; this Orcish specimen had prickled my fascination.

“Have no fear! He is just a single beast!” The Orc Noble shouted, bolstering the morale of his troops who regained their fighting spirit and charged once more into the fray. This time, though, they attacked with more cunning, circling the Ogre and only attacking if there came a gap in the hulking monstrosity’s defenses. These Orc Warriors were hard-pressed, and even by using their fervor, not one of them could even wound the Ogre. Still, their assault was enough to distract the Ogre’s attention from his real foe.

“For the King!” The Orc Noble roared as he thrust his halberd with all his might, his battle fervor glowing brighter than at any prior point during the battle. Blood spattered as his blade cut into the thick shin of the Ogre, the cut itself being about as deep as a human hand is long.

“Seize the opportunity!” He commanded his Orc Warriors, who stabbed into the wounded shank of the Ogre with spears and swords, soon causing the single cut to become a great ragged wound. Still, this beast who was truly a Lord of the Mountain did not kneel, and did not supplicate himself before his foes. No, the damage that had been done to him only angered him more as his rampage grew in intensity. The Ogre now swatted its arms out in random arcs, his mighty blows catching a few unlucky Orcs full-on before they could escape before its wrath.

My attention was wrenched away from the brutal melee by something that grabbed onto my collar. It was Adelia, her head half-buried into my chest as she stared into my eyes, her face still that shade of ghostly pale. She was trembling, her face filled with anguish. It was her eyes that caught my attention, for they were a sickly shade of yellowish-red.

“Oh, shit,” I muttered as I realized what was happening to her. I had forgotten all about poor Adelia. The smell of blood was thick on the air, and it was this smell that now threatened to unleash the maniac I held in my arms. “No! Have patience,” I commanded her. The auras of [War Mania] and [Butcher] weakened around her, yet did not completely disappear. “Be patient now. Wait a little, and then you can run wild.”

She buried her face into my chest once more, and then her hissing breath slammed

through the thick fur and armor that I wore. Between her mouth and my heart, there danced that sickly yellow and red light, which marked her true nature. Her body trembled like an aspen in the wind, though not out of fear: No, she was shaking, gripped by a peal of lunatic laughter. I got goosebumps just being close to her, and I knew then that there was a new monster upon the mountain.

I felt the chaos that was her being, the chaos she could never hope to control. I felt that chaos against my breast. I knew then that I should have left her at Winter Castle, yet now was not the time for such idle regrets. As I held her head within my grasp, more men came up behind me. They looked at the snowy clearing in open wonder. Even the Rangers were surprised by the scene before them.

"The north truly is an amazing and strange place," Ehrim Kiringer commented. I understood his wonderment, for before leaving the royal capital, even I did not imagine that monsters such as this Ogre existed. We could not afford to be surprised, though, for the thing still lived. The Orcs had by now become desperate, focusing all their efforts on at least taking its leg and thereby crippling it. It roared in defiance, clearly unfazed by their futile efforts. Suddenly, Adelia's red aura began to shine brighter and brighter, her eyes flashing and taking on sickly, yellowish hues. Ehrim's expression hardened as he saw this.

"What the hell? That's horrible," he muttered. It was merely the essence of her existence, for she had inherited from the day she was born the aspects of a predator whose hunger was endless. She was a natural [Butcher]. Adelia began to glow more and more within my grasp.

I then understood what was happening. She was reacting sensitively to the energy of another [Butcher], that beast who gored his way through so many Orcs. I hugged her tightly, and she, in turn, held fast onto me. She knew it was not yet time for us to intervene, so with the last vestige of will that she had, she prevented herself from jumping into the fray.

To attack now would be folly, for we had not yet seen the Ogre's true essence. Let him sate his appetite on the Orcs.

"Go get him, boys!" the Noble Orc commanded. The Ogre twisted its mouth into a cruel roar; its face stretched into a most ferocious and bestial grin. It flew at its foes, and the Noble Orc rolled out of its way as he once more summoned battle fervor into his halberd. His maneuver had been of no use, though, for the Ogre had other targets

in mind. In a whirlwind of motion, the Ogre had stormed into the largest grouping of Orc Warriors, tearing them apart by teeth and claw. Orcish limbs scattered through the air as the Ogre tore into them, shaking its head like an enraged bull. In a matter of seconds, ten Orc Warriors had lost their lives. The Orc Noble had not even had a chance to thrust his halberd at his behemoth foe before the thing had torn into the next group of Orc Warriors.

Truly, the butcher's festival had begun in earnest. The remaining Orcs struggled to face such madness and launched themselves at the Ogre, heedless of their own safety. They could not even scratch it as it once more tore through Orcish flesh like a child tearing the wings from flies.

"And you came here to kill something like that?" Ehrim asked me incredulously. His doubt was natural, for the Orc had revealed its essence as a [Butcher], an essence that was on par with that of a [Sword Master]. The thought that I, as a [Sword Expert], could kill this being was absurd, at least when viewed through a conventional lens.

I knew, however, that sometimes one had to take great risks to reap great rewards. Improvement did not come through doing the expected; no, only by facing the impossible could the quality of a knight truly improve, like facing the beast that rampaged through the clearing.

"Prepare yourselves, it's almost time for us to intervene," I said to my comrades. The Orc Warriors who had charged into the clearing had numbered about a hundred. Less than twenty now remained. The Noble Orc yet lived, but the Ogre ignored him, choosing the softer targets of his warriors rather.

"You are a beast without pride!" The Orc Noble roared as he once more charged at the Ogre. The thing turned his back upon the Orc Noble, loping after some of the remaining Orc Warriors. I clucked my tongue, for it was evident that the Ogre's apparent disregard of his foe was rather a cunning trap to ensnare the greatest threat. As I had expected, the Ogre continued its charade. When the Noble Orc charged in for a strike, the Ogre swiveled about and grabbed the blade of the halberd in its hand. The Noble Orc increased the fervor within his weapon, managing to cut the Ogre's palm and draw some blood. The monstrosity still held onto the weapon, though. The Ogre reached toward his trapped foe.

Red speculation and the sickly green flesh of the Ogre met, and then: A flash of gold.

It was Adelia, who had escaped my grasp. The Ogre had not even given her a second glance, the slim little human who dared to charge at it. That in itself had been its gravest mistake. The human that this Lord of the Mountain had considered as an insignificant gnat was, in truth, a true descendant of the King Of Giants, the monarch of that great race that had ruled this world in ages past. The sword she wielded had been bathed countless times in the blood of those very giants, and seeing as the Ogre was also a scion of that extinct race, her blade now hungered to taste his flesh.

Her excited voice rang clear in the winter air:

“Into a river flowed the blood

The land, enriched by flesh.”

With these words, the golden aura of that auspicious sword bloomed brightly. Its murderous intention toward the hulking abomination that stalked the clearing was strongly felt. Adelia had uttered a passage from the [Psalm of Gaebyeok], compiled by Geomhu. The Orc roared its fearful shock as it realized far too late that this small woman was the natural, ancient enemy of its vile kind.

The karma and the giant-slaying sword of Adelia now bore down on the beast, and even if the sword had known greater wielders in the past, it still cut into the Ogre’s with ease.

“Kwaaaaaggggg!” the beast roared as a thin red line appeared on its back, almost as thin as a strand of silk. This cut soon bloomed bright red, though, and blood spurted from a wound that was, in fact, a deep, deep cut. And as the blood fountained, Adelia cackled with pure glee. The Ogre continued to bellow and roar, yet the victor had already been determined.

“With the blood of the giant

And the flesh of its back

I shall remake the earth anew.”

Another passage from the [Psalm of Gaebyeok] flowed from me then, yet I soon had to stop in my recital. I could not handle the raw power of the remaining verses and was so forced into silence. As I struggled to deal with the pain that such a half-poem had left in my heart, a brilliant flash of light lingered upon the tip of my blade.

* * *

Ehrim Kiringer could not believe his eyes.

The slender woman, who had for some unknown reason been included in their party, had struggled in her ascent of the mountain. Now this same woman had cleaved through the hide of the Ogre in a single swipe of her sword. A hundred Orcs and their channeled battle fervor had struggled to inflict a single wound upon the beast, and even then, it had decimated them all. As the blood spurted from the Ogre's back, the woman who was drenched by this arterial spray stood there, her bloody grin stretching wide upon her face. He struggled to take in her bizarre appearance.

Even if the Ogre had roared in his face, Ehrim was unsure whether he could have snapped out of his dazed state of complete surprise. Slowly his hand edged to his blade, yet before he could even draw it, he saw the Ogre's fingers, each as thick as a human wrist, severed and flying through the air. Adrian stood before the monster, and his brilliant fiery blade had severed its digits.

"You are just the beginning of my journey," Prince Adrian said as the beast gave off another furious, pain-filled roar.

CHAPTER 60
EVEN IN THE SNOWY WINTER

Ehrim Kiringer dared not intervene in such a terrible battle. There was the problem of the wounded Ogre, a maddened beast that lashed out in its anger. Then there was the problem of the man and woman, their insane blades appearing to be even more lethal than the rampaging monster.

With each swipe of her golden blade, Adelia tore into the armor-like hide of the Ogre. Her attacks followed one upon the other, and she gave no heed as to her own defense. The bloodied beast pulled a punch, and after having taken a swing at it, Adelia was caught off-balance and vulnerable. Its meaty fist did not pulp her head, though, for the First Prince interceded himself between the woman and the blow as his sword glowed with a new type of brilliance.

Sword met fist, and the blade cleaved deeply through the Ogre's fingers. The Ogre grabbed his head and bellowed in pain as the blood slowly dripped from his ravaged hand. The First Prince had vaulted through the air and rolled onto his legs to once more stand before the Ogre. Adelia had recovered by then and struck once more, her sword cleaving clean through the Ogre's wrist. The beast now moaned in fear and in suffering as it swung at her with its remaining hand. She easily dodged its desperate attempt.

Where and how did the First Prince meet this woman?

The humans simultaneously dodged another attack, both jumping up at the same time as they charged once more at their foe.

Ehrim felt nothing but admiration and awe as he watched the scene unfold before him. Adelia's initial attacks had been powerful, yet now it was the Prince who truly carried the battle. Adelia struck like a maniac, while the Prince had to defend both himself and her from the Ogre's assaults. At first glance, one would assume it had been a pre-arranged strategy, yet Ehrim knew just how spontaneous and chaotic their tactics truly were. The woman's strikes were as blind as those of the Ogre, she cared little whether someone fought at her side. She had drawn her sword and attacked; that was the only reasoning that had gone through her mind. Not only did

she neglect her own defense, but she also disrupted any attempt at predicting her movements.

The Ogre could not focus on her.

Adrian supported her selfish and blind offensive exquisitely. To one untutored in the ways of war, it would seem as if the woman pulled the punches in the battle. The truth, however, was that the First Prince and his tactics carried the day, for without his keen application of them, Adelia would have been sprawled out onto the ground, her corpse cooling on the snow.

How many battles had the First Prince fought since his arrival at Winter Castle? Had it truly been just a year since Adrian had taken up the sword?

His skill had truly evolved beyond comparison to his past inadequacies, yet he was not the only one whose prowess had increased at an exponential rate.

There was also Arwen Kirgayen.

The woman who had once aspired to become a Wire Knight now served as a skilled knight in service of the First Prince. While Ehrim and Dunham circled the Ogre, seeking a gap where they could lend their aid, Arwen had taken it upon herself to command the Rangers. She had ordered them to kill off the remaining Orcs, who, despite their exhaustion, still posed a threat. Her judgment had been sound, and soon the Orcs fell by the arrow and by the blade.

She raised her hand as the Rangers prepared to fire once more.

The triple-chain knight then unleashed the mana from her rings. The Orcs stepped back, cautious, yet did not yet flee, for their fierce leader had other plans.

“Kugurk krahakduk!” One of the Orcs shouted as he lazily rubbed his neck. Ehrim knew that the First Prince spoke Orcish, so he looked towards him. The fight with the Ogre was reaching its end, with the beast sitting in a pool of its own blood. Both its feet had been severed, and one of its hands had been cut off to a nub. The beast was confusedly touching the ground with its severed hand while lashing out with the other in all directions. The site was a grisly one, yet pitiful all the same.

The human warriors who had bested the beast now seemed truly vicious. Adelia, drenched in blood, slashed into the Ogre’s back in an upward arc. So great was the

ferocity behind her strike that she severed its entire shoulder. Terrible was its tortured wailing as it struggled and writhed on the ground. She climbed onto its back and cackled as her eyes sparkled with red and yellow energies. At long last, she pierced her golden blade through the nape of the monster's neck. The Ogre coughed up a bloody, bubbling froth as she pulled her blade out, and pierced his throat once more, and again and again. The terrible sound was like a butcher chopping up a tough slab of meat. The sight of it was nightmarish, and Ehrim could no longer bear to watch as he averted his gaze.

The First Prince now started to stride towards the Orcs, his body not as covered with the Ogre's blood as much as Adelia's. Adrian stretched his muscles, his bones crackling as they once more prepared for battle.

A strange sound came from the First Prince's lips, and Ehrim realized that he was speaking the vile language of the Orcs. Adrian chatted for a while with the Orc Noble, yet Ehrim could not guess as to the topic of their conversation. It all just sounded like growls without any nuance or linguistic structure. In the next moment, the First Prince placed his hand upon a Ranger's crossbow.

"Get back," came Adrian's order. Arwen immediately responded to the order. She bowed, slid her sword back into its scabbard, and stepped a few paces back. The Rangers lowered their crossbows to a man. Ehrim frowned at this.

As he understood things, the First Prince and the Orc, who faced each other with crossed arms, were to engage in a duel. Was that truly what was happening?

The Orc Noble once more grunted out its words, and Adrian's voice crackled with a response. This seemed to be an introduction between the two before the duel proper. Ehrim was amazed, for he was about to witness a duel between an Orc and a human. For him, this was unheard of.

Ehrim recalled how well this Orc had fought against the Ogre, and decided that it was at least as strong as a triple-chain knight. It was pure recklessness, facing such a strong foe after the fierce battle with the Ogre.

Even if he would be rebuked for it, Ehrim decided he could not allow the eldest son of the Leonberger dynasty to become monster food. He placed his hand upon the pommel of his sword and prepared himself to intercede in the duel. In the end, however, his worries came to naught.

The level of skill that the First Prince showed was unbelievable if one considered that he only had a year in which he had developed them. His movements were economical and agile as if he had walked upon countless battlefields over many decades. Even if his breathing came out in short rasps, he could stabilize it in the fierce clamor of battle.

He also employed his mana only when absolutely necessary. Adrian was only sixteen, not yet of age for the unity of Geomgi-sin (劍氣身). However, in Ehrim's eyes, His Majesty seemed to have already reached that point.

When he had visited Wire Castle a scant few months ago, the boy had still been a clumsy person. His growth rate has been so tremendous that only by seeing it with one's own eyes could it be believed. A deathly cry echoed through the clearing, shaking Ehrim from his thoughts. Had the battle already reached a conclusion?

Ehrim saw that the Orc Noble had been pierced through its heart with Adrian's sword, blood hemorrhaging from the wound. The First Prince kicked the dying Orc backward as he wrenched his blade free from its chest. The Orc convulsed as it fell forward, bowing to the Prince.

"Krugark kuhu krak," it said.

His Majesty, the First Prince, replied in the Orcish tongue: "Krugdar krah krug."

The Orc Noble then closed its eyes with a contented expression, and those eyes never opened again. Ehrim guessed that Adrian had thanked the Orc for a good duel by a good warrior.

The First Prince sank to the ground. "Aaah, it feels like I'm dying," he said as he sat there with his eyes closed. Arwen and the Rangers came running up, causing the Prince to jump to his feet.

"Adelia!" Adrian shouted to his comrade, who raised herself up from the pool of the Ogre's blood.

"Your Majesty…" Adelia managed to say before breaking into tears. Adrian always hated the moment when she regained her senses. She cried and cried, her tears washing the blood from her face. Ehrim and the Rangers trembled at her grotesque appearance.

They deemed it best not to look at her at all.

* * *

After camping for a day and tending their wounds, the party headed further into the mountains, hunting for more game.

The Rangers now almost ran through the snow, no sign to be seen of their earlier stealth and prudence. Their reasoning was sound, for they reckoned that so strong was the stench of an Ogre that most monsters had fled the moment they had smelled it.

“Aren’t the Orcs hunting ogres?” Ehrim asked Adrian.

“I wonder if there are other groups of Orcs who would hunt as the others did yesterday. Normally, Orcs would never dare come near an Ogre,” the First Prince replied, his expression dour and gloomy.

“I think any sane being would run from an ogre,” Ehrim muttered.

The lead Ranger suddenly gave a hand signal.

“Based on his signal, the threat is another ogre, or something akin to it,” Adrian explained to his companions in a whisper.

“Keeeeh keeh eh eh! Keeeeh keeeh eh!”

From some distance away, a sharp roar came slamming into everyone’s ears.

“Damn, so soon?” one the mercenaries muttered as the sound of heavy footsteps came crashing their way. Their new foe had appeared.

It had moldy skin and a hawk’s bill from which sprouted four vicious tusks, much like that of a wild boar. Hundreds of shambling corpses came upon them as well, their stench too terrible to describe.

“It’s a troll,” Adrian said as he once more drew his sword. Trolls were the inheritors of the cunning of Giants, as well as their resilience. Trolls constantly regenerated their bodies, even if they took grievous amounts of damage.

The First Prince hated battling trolls, so he gave the butcher woman the chance to battle it alone. After half a day's fighting, with the party hacking through many bloated zombie corpses, they resumed their journey. Wherever they went, red bruises remained upon the pure white snow.

Bloodflowers bloomed throughout canyons and upon slopes.

The seed the Prince had planted in his handmaiden began to blossom.

『[Poetry of Dominace] reacts to a change in one of your comrades.』

『Adelia Bavaria has gained a new characteristic.』

Adrian was amazed at this message. He was also terrified of what other changes could have come to her trait column. Before he could analyze the change in his handmaiden, though, another message came before him:

『Adelia Bavaria has created a new dance poem.』

『The one who has sworn fealty pays tribute to their master by bolstering his karma and martial arts.』

CHAPTER 61
ORCS OVER ORCS (1)

I had recited some verses from Adelia's dance poem, [The Jackdaw's Poetry].

"The day when my hunger shall be sated,

The day when my thirst shall be quenched,

That day shall never come."

A low, keening hum reverberated throughout the immediate area. I was stunned by it, that tale of longing and despair. I had only encountered this type of verse a few times in my entire existence, despite having lived for many centuries and having witnessed countless forms of dance poetry. Adelia was staring at me. Tears flooded from her eyes, her mouth shut taught, and her hands clenched before her.

If one did not know her, the logical assumption would have been that she had been forced onto the field of battle against her will. Was there anything as unfair as her twisted destiny? It was whenever her weeping started anew that I resented myself and my role in her life. With a sigh, I placed the troll's heart beside me and scanned over her traits.

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□ Adelia Bavaria [Female] [18] [Maiden]

□ Aptitudes: [Swordsmanship (劍術)-S], [Mana Response (感應)-A]

□ Characteristics: [Butcher] [War Mania] [Appetite] [Caring] [Tender] [Servility]

==========

I soon realized what the newly created [Appetite] trait was, and I knew that its appetite could never be sated. This was due to the fact that [The Jackdaw's Poetry] was a song of endless and insatiable longing.

[War Mania] and [Butcher] had been annoying and terrifying enough, yet now a trait just as bloody had been created.

I shook my head, trying to be more optimistic. There was one point of hope, at the very least.

Even if I had only heard scattered verses of it, I knew that [The Jackdaw's Poetry] was a verse on an extraordinary level, far beyond that of regular poems. Its creation had been fortuitous, and it had made my expedition into these cold mountains worth it for another reason entirely. I was content with adding another trump card in my future battle against the Warlord. I recited these verses time after time as we continued our journey.

We had by then decided to scout the mountain for any Trolls or Ogres that dared cross our way. The Rangers conducted the grisly task of butchery, skinning the Ogres for their hide and removing the tusks of trolls. We wandered within the mountains in this manner for a few days until finally, we encountered no more elite monsters. If we wished to continue our hunt, we would need to head deeper into the range. I considered the Blade's Edge Mountains as they stretched out before us. I stood there for quite a while.

"Let's head back." The Rangers visibly brightened at my words.

Many days had passed since our departure from the fortress, and I did not wish to be upon the mountain in the midst of a harsh Winter longer than what was prudent. Our descent went smoothly. Not one monster crossed our path. With Adelia having bathed in the blood of Ogre and Troll so many times, I could not fault them for fleeing before her stench.

The time finally came when we crested a familiar hill and there, on the horizon, stood Winter Castle. A group of Orcs surrounded it, with Rangers loosening arrows into their charging ranks, and with knights unleashing their mana, the blue glow from these discharges lighting up the night.

Winter Castle was the same as always, in full swing.

"What will we do?" Asked Ehrim Kiringer. I made a rough count of the Orcs. More had fallen than those who were still alive, yet those who still lived amounted to about three-hundred. "We can break through, Ehrim." I knew that once we came

within sight of the walls that the knights would open the gates for us. I had inured them to the practice of throwing the gate open and charging.

“I’ll take point. You Rangers hold the middle. Sir Ehrim, Dunham, Arwen — the rest of you — hold the flanks and our rear.”

I had ordered my party to ready themselves for battle. The knights had drawn their swords, and the Rangers had loosened the knots on their knives, the blades being in easy reach.

“Can’t we just wait here?” One of the Silver Fox mercenaries asked me, his voice trembling.

“If the Orcs retreat, they will come this way,” I told them. At my words, he readied his sword and the other his spear, though reluctantly. They were supposed to be veterans yet were afraid in a situation like this. I clucked my tongue.

As we approached the rear of their forces, I saw that the Orcs were commanded by an Orc Shaman. He had the skull of a beast as his mask and wielded a bone wand in his hand. His attention was focused upon the ramparts. I pointed at him with my blade. The knights nodded, and the Rangers found their targets, their eyes ablaze. The mercenaries merely groaned in fear.

“Go.”

* * *

Vincent shouted as he thrust his blade through an Orc’s head as it peeked over the wall. “How many remain? Hold the line! Once this day is won, you can all rest for four days!” The Orcs had pressed the Rangers hard, attacking them with waves of battle fervor. Vincent studied the battlements.

Not many Orcs had gained the walls; the blades of the knights had made sure of this. On occasion, the Orc Shaman unleashed his power, yet his impact thus far had been minimal. The Wire Knights had held the wall well, allowing the Rangers to do their duty. If things continued like this, victory would soon come, and the casualties would be minimal. The battle could not have gone smoother.

Vincent studied the field in front of the gate. Many Orcs were gathered there, clanging their axes and roaring their battle cries. If Prince Adrian had been here, he

would have led a charge into those lines some time ago. Vincent shuddered; he needed to be awake. War was not a knightly game; war was not a game of chess. Chiding himself, he encouraged the Rangers to find their targets.

He could not help but cast guilty glances at the gate.

He swung his sword with renewed vigor, piercing an Orc through its mouth. Many more Orcs fell from the walls onto the corpse piles below. Still, the Orcs who climbed the battlements came on and on. They had been persistent before, yet today they exerted themselves more than usual.

“Fuck,” Vincent couldn’t help but swear. Those Orcs who had been wounded flocked around the shaman. Meanwhile, those who knew they were about to die continued their climb, proving how persistent they could be.

“That damned shaman is taking his toll on us,” Vincent said, for, despite the smooth nature of the defense, his men were still suffering losses.

He tried to formulate a better strategy as he studied the horde of Orcs. The Orcs who held the banners around their commanders suddenly started moving. A strange flash flared up among them. The Orcs who were climbing began to falter as they realized they were also facing an attack from the rear.

“The Prince has come to aid us!” A Ranger shouted. The other Rangers followed his pointing finger and saw a young man who had killed the Orc bearing the banner.

“His Majesty the Prince has returned! His Majesty has killed the shaman!” Rangers cheered upon hearing this.

“Those motherfuckers, really,” Vincent muttered with a shrug, yet was inwardly relieved. Knights and commanders, men who had survived dozens of winters in the north, were cheering on a boy who had not yet lived through one of these winters. They were cheering for him as if he was the greatest veteran among them. Vincent found it to be absurd. These men were cheering as if the lord of Winter Castle himself had returned.

“Well, it seems that His Majesty the First Prince will soon be bossing us all around,” he grumbled. “We gather at the gates! Only thirty men charge out!” The knights on the walls rushed to the gate, and Vincent ran down as well to greet the returned party. Soon the faint sound of a song was heard over the strong wind as Rangers sang

of Winter Castle, and knights sang the song called The City of War. The gates ground open, and roaring Orcs rushed into the gap, yet they were immediately repulsed by knights who had summoned auras into their blades.

“You guys! No order has been given… ugh, fine. Charge!” commanded Vincent.

“Well, well,” said Maximilian as he considered the scene. From the moment that his brother had joined the battle, the morale of the troops had picked up. Exhausted Rangers fired their arrows swifter than before, and the auras of the knights burned a deeper shade of blue. Even the commanders of Winter Castle had flushed and lively faces after the close battle they had fought.

The arrows poured down in a great hail as the Orcs were swept away by the missiles. The knights bravely charged after each volley smashed into the monsters. Swords slashed into the foes, and the Orcs faltered under the assault. It had become a massacre, no longer a battle. The Orcs could bear no more as they turned tail and ran. Despite their sacrifices, the Orcs were now led by fear as they fled.

It was truly a magical scene, and it was all thanks to the sixteen-year-old Prince that the tide of battle had so quickly turned. Maximilian could not help but admire his brother. A horn sounded throughout the castle, trumpeting the victory.

“Victory is ours!” The soldiers cheered as they praised the harbinger of their victory.

The names of knights and commanders were also lauded by the rank and file, for these men had supported their soldiers like firm boulders in the face of a storm. The biggest cheer was still directed towards Adrian, however.

“We honor His Majesty, the First Prince! Long may he live!”

Maximilian paused for a moment. “Long live the First Prince!” he then shouted, joining the cheers. A Wire knight beside him regarded him with wide eyes, surprised that he had so eagerly joined in the cheering of his brother.

Amid this cheer and joy, the First Prince passed through the gates. His triumphal march as he hefted the red banner was met with even greater fanfare from the soldiers.

At that very moment, a great roar erupted from deep within the mountains. All cheering ceased as every eye turned towards the range.

All that could be seen were the snowy peaks reflected in the moonlight, yet everyone in Winter Castle felt the dire presence of something coming ever closer.

The Warlord was finally on the march.

CHAPTER 62
ORCS OVER ORCS (2)

The joy of victory and at Adrian's return had quickly abated. The atmosphere had become subdued, somber, almost as if the day had been a defeat rather than a victory. Maximilian felt as if he was suffocating. He knew he had to bolster the men's morale, yet his lips refused to move.

That terrible roar from the mountains had left him standing still like some idiot. He chewed his lips, wishing that he could move.

"Look here!" An arrogant-sounding voice called out. All eyes focused on the First Prince as he moved further into the courtyard, leaving only the carnage of battle in his wake. At an order, Rangers started to spread something across the ground. It was the hides of large beasts, colored almost like the skin of a human yet far tougher and intersected by yellowish and red hues. As they were laid out, a large head flopped onto the ground.

The sound of disgusted gasps was heard from every quarter. Everyone stared at the head of a vicious monster, the head itself looking as if it would come alive at any moment. "We have slain fourteen Ogres and eleven Trolls," Adrian declared. "Had we more time, the hides would have been drier," he added, with the obvious arrogance in his tone giving voice to the pride in his heart.

"Why is there but a single head?" asked Vincent.

"Why lug such useless things with us? One souvenir is more than enough. What, do you doubt my word?"

"Not entirely, yet I see only four hides. It is your accounting that I doubt."

Upon hearing Vincent's words, Adrian crossed his arms. "We have been very busy. You think I would dare lie about such things?" As if he had just remembered, Adrian held out his hand, into which a Ranger placed something wrapped in red cloth. "A halberd from the Orc Noble I had slain, as well as the wand from the Orc Shaman who had tested your walls."

Rangers had been watching the Prince's attempts at proving his prowess, like a child seeking praise from its parents. "What's the score now?" One of the Rangers asked loudly.

"After our breach of their lines, and me taking their banner, my count is on thirty-nine," Adrian declared imperiously.

"Our captain killed thirty-eight!" a Ranger shouted, naming the true number. The First Prince thrust out his arm, his fist clenched.

"Vincent Balahard!" he exclaimed, raising his thumb and then thrusting it downward. "I won."

Vincent's face crumpled at hearing this.

"His Majesty has overtaken our captain!"

"The captain lost!"

"You stole the banner from behind their lines! Admit it!" Vincent cried out. Knights and Rangers started to jeer and boo upon hearing Vincent's words.

"Admit defeat, leader! Show honor!"

"If we add the Ogres and Trolls he killed, you are far behind, captain! Admit defeat!"

"Have you all forgotten who truly rules Winter Castle?" shouted Vincent, abandoned by his officers. No one deigned to respond to his petulance.

At that moment, a strong voice was heard. "Ah, so you have all found the greatest warrior in Winter Castle, then?" Everyone turned their heads to the speaker. It was Count Bale Balahard, who had been silent all along.

"I killed fifty-nine," he plainly stated. "You whelps still have a long way to go."

Shame spread through the ranks of men as their memories were refreshed. Here stood a knight among knights, a man who had fought Orcs for so many winters. He had slaughtered the most.

"Ah, so an old man plays with the young ones, now," Adrian spat out cheekily.

“My record never disappears,” the Count countered with a winning smile. Maximilian, having been confused by events, now realized that the prestigious Count had intentionally involved himself in the contest for the banner. The atmosphere in Winter Castle had become jovial once more after the soul-deadening roar of the Warlord. Maximilian noticed as the Count and his son exchanged meaningful glances, and the realization hit him then: These men did not care about the banner or their kill count. They merely wished to focus the soldiers’ attention on something other than the terror of the Warlord’s roar.

“Well, I did not hear my Uncle’s words. I am still the best,” Adrian stated as he clung to the banner like a monkey to a tree. The recent tension and anxiety of the army had all but evaporated.

“The wounded should head to barracks for healing. Those who are still hale will clear the battlefield,” commanded the Count as men started to move once more.

“Stop fucking around and go fetch your arrows, Rangers! I don’t want to hear about it, just get it done,” an officer spat at his men. “The milksops who fail to collect every arrow they fired will run along the walls until dawn!”

“Huh, now we have to cut the arrows out of these green-skins with our own eating knives,” a Ranger grumbled as he headed through the gates.

Maximilian continued to study the scene with an undiminished sense of awe. The commanders here truly knew how to improvise, and he could see that they have grown up alongside the men they commanded. It only took a few well-placed orders instead of grandiose speeches to bolster the men’s morale. Still more impressive was Adrian himself, a prince who had lived in the lap of luxury at the palace all his life, yet carried himself as if he was a veteran who had seen the harshest faces of war.

“Your Majesty, I report,” said Ehrim Kiringer as he approached the Second Prince with his head bowed.

“Go to my chambers,” Maximilian ordered.

The old knight would surely have many tales to tell.

* * *

The Ogre, a terrifying thing in life, managed to inspire the same terror by the mere

presence of its corpse.

I had exhibited its head for all to see, just like triumphal generals would exhibit their loot after a campaign. I only prayed that the soldiers who had seen the slain beast would gain courage from the sight. I knew that my success was also half a failure. The gloom that had beset the castle had not been fully dissipated by my exhibition, for the presence of the Warlord had lain heavily upon everyone's hearts. The Ranger, the knights, and all their commanders feared to even utter the name of the Warlord.

They feared that naming the evil would somehow grant it even greater power.

I clucked my tongue at the thought. Even the Rangers, veterans of the war against the monsters, held to such superstitions. I knew that the men from the capital would be even more shaken by the magnitude of the foe that they faced. I saw two men walk by, the mercenaries that Antoine had attached to my party. Even so long after the Warlord's roar, I could see the absolute terror written plain on the faces of these men.

The fear of the soldiers irked me, their response to the situation bordering on the pathetic. Yet, that did not mean that I did not understand their reaction. The roar that had slammed into us had not been of a mundane nature. It had been loosed by a monster that has transcended the limits of its brutish species, its roar containing such great reserves of fervor as it announced its terrible presence.

It was a declaration of war. Its raw power had pressed upon the souls of even those who had experienced the harshest of battles. Even such veterans would struggle in the battle to come. The same counted for the mercenaries, men who had made war their bread and butter.

One reason why I saw the Silver Foxes' response as pathetic was that the men of Winter Castle had already recovered from the peril and went about their duties with great alacrity. I knew that the mercenaries were not weak; rather, it was the people of Winter Castle who were stronger. Yet, even these strong men would not survive the coming war. We needed more soldiers.

"Why have more men not come to aid us?" I asked loudly.

I had expected more reinforcements from the lords of the realm by now, yet none had arrived while I had hunted in the mountains. I had sent out many heralds upon

detecting the presence of the Warlord. I had stressed the direness of our situation, beseeching the nobility to arm and send soldiers as soon as they were able. The reinforcements from the capital had arrived, yet not a single squad from the provinces bordering Balahard had so far graced us with their presence. Something was awry.

“The stragglers from the capital had arrived in your absence. Through them I gathered news of the other lords,” Vincent responded, deep anger in his tone. “According to these men, the central and other northern lords have no intention to send troops to our aid.”

“If this fortress falls, do they not know that they shall be doomed and their lands ravaged!?” I roared, no longer able to control the fury that beat in my breast.

“Adrian, relax and take heart,” Count Balahard interceded gently. “Winter Castle shall never fall.”

I narrowed my eyes upon hearing his words. He met my gaze, his eyes so strangely deep.

“Surely?” I asked, knowing full well that sarcasm dripped like poison from my tongue.

“It hasn’t fallen yet, has it? But we’ve come close,” he responded with a laugh.

I admired him then, for how unfazed he appeared to be.

It felt like yesterday when he had viewed me as nothing but a fat little nuisance who went around falling on swords. He had long ago overcome such petty reservations regarding my nature.

“Admittedly, it would be pleasant if we had more time. Yet in war, time is ever in short supply.”

Even after saying this, I could see little fear in him. No, it seemed as if he welcomed the coming of the Warlord.

“Have no worries. Winter Castle and its knights have never faltered against Orcs,” he stated with absolute confidence, with the confidence of a quad-chain knight.

* * *

The Orcs, who had attacked the castle every four days, did not do so again. The forces within Winter Castle enjoyed their rest as they prepared for the upcoming battle. I had spoken with Maximilian, asking that he request reinforcements using his own name and title.

“If the name of Count Balahard does not secure aid, at least yours will.”

I did not think that the lords would ignore the title of the Second Prince. My brother did not say much, but having assessed the political situation, he wrote his letter requesting support in a fairly strong and heavy-handed tone. Those rangers who possessed the greatest stamina were sent out as messengers to the neighboring lords.

“Will they come?”

“They will come. The question remains, will they come in time?”

Maximilian shared my anxiety. He clearly felt the enormity of the threat that we faced.

“Brother,” I told him. “If things go awry, lead the retreat.”

“Why do you sound so grim, brother?”

“Our troops are insufficient. Yet, the men of Winter Castle will defend its stones to last. They shall never abandon this place.”

My Uncle had once stated in clear terms that the troops who lived in the castle would die in the castle. Never would they retreat and surrender its walls if they still drew breath. However, I knew that they had to be prepared for the possibility of retreat against the Warlord.

Maximilian balked at my order, saying that even if he was not a man of Winter Castle, his duty was still to command his men in battle.

The subsequent power struggle as to the succession to the throne did not seem to concern him at all. I smiled at this, happy that at least one of the scions of Gruhorn Leonberger still had fiery blood flowing through his veins. As the Rangers scattered

across the realm with their messages, knights called the Black Lancers, the pride of Balahard, arrived at the castle.

“We have completed our mission. Forgive us for arriving late,” their commander said. The Count had sent them out on a special mission, and upon their arrival, I smelled the dark blood on their jet-black armor. If the Winter Knights were well-forged swords, the Black Lancers could only be described as ravening beasts of war. They struggled to keep their mana chained, and to a man, they looked fierce and hardened.

“Ah, the First Prince. It honors me to meet you in this time of war.” The man who had spoken was Quéon Lichtheim, the commander of the Black Lancers. He had stared and grinned at me like a hungry wolf.

“I might hurt the pride of young Vincent Balahard by saying this, but to fight alongside Your Majesty will be an exquisite experience.”

“Lord Quéon!” chided the Count.

“Regardless, Prince Adrian, I look forward to the coming war,” Lichtheim said, this time bowing to me.

“Oh, so do I, Sir Quéon,” I said. I was surprised that he treated me without prejudice. Clearly, word of my deeds had reached his ears.

The welcoming ceremony for the Black Lancers, consummate experts in assault, soon ended. At that point in time, the Warlord’s presence had drawn close to the castle. At most, he was between four days and a week away from us. There was truly little time left to prepare for his arrival.

My mind was set, then. I contemplated the fragments of my soul that slumbered within me, mentally preparing myself to face this dire foe.

No sign of reinforcement reached us, though unwelcome guests did arrive.

A blizzard blew in upon that day, and with it came a great army of Orcs. The selfsame red banner flew above their ranks, though its symbology was different this time.

It was the banner of the King of the Orcs, their hero who had transcended the base nature of his race.

It was the banner of the Warlord.

CHAPTER 63
ORCS OVER ORCS (3)

No man could doubt it once they saw this army. They could not doubt the type of being that led the twenty-thousand troops who now gathered upon the plain.

They would know that it was the King of the Orcs, a being born to rule, a being that had transcended the base nature of its species.

A tyrant born in the Blade's Edge Mountains.

They would know that it was the Warlord.

Against his fearsome presence, the soldiers in Winter Castle were beset by a trembling fear. Knights had their martial spirit shattered. More and more mercenaries sat upon the ground, some even falling down as they covered their heads and gibbered their cowardice.

Before the battle's advent, it already seemed to be lost.

The Warlord grabbed its banner, then, lifting that great piece of iron over its shoulders as if it was but a puny spear. A red haze streamed toward the castle and settled upon its highest spire, where the symbol of Balahard fluttered in the wind.

The Warlord pulled his shoulder back and threw his red banner. It came on like a miniature blizzard, piercing the air. With a metallic clang, it drove itself into the erstwhile flagpole of Balahard's own insignia. As if this castle had always been his, his red heraldry fluttered upon its highest reaches.

His proclamation was clear: The King of the Orcs claimed this wintery realm as his own.

"That beast has officially declared war against our hearth and home," the Count said with a frown, studying the soldiers. Rangers and knights were staring at the Orcish army with ashen faces and crushed spirits. Their morale had been broken to such an extent that each and every one of them doubted whether they could face the foe.

Their response was natural, considering the hopeless odds they faced.

Even the four Knights of Gori were troubled by the Warlord's presence, yet I knew those four at least would never back down.

* * *

"Since we have received such a gift, let us return the favor!" One of the braver knights declared. "Who is going to ascend the spire?"

Soldiers stared up at the tower upon hearing these words, and to their amazement, they saw a figure pass by window after window as he ascended the stairs.

"Tell the First Prince that someone has already gone towards the banner!" The knight shouted.

"But he is already there!"

The Count frowned, now realizing why Adrian had left them.

The First Prince stood amid the tumultuous roar of the blizzard as he cleaved straight through the haft of the Warlord's banner.

He stood upon the spire, lifting the cloth for all to see. He stood there like a triumphal general who had claimed the enemy's greatest treasure.

Count Bale Balahard could only admire the actions of his nephew, for he understood his intentions.

The sundering of the Balahard banner had been a final blow to the defender's morale. Now that the Orcish banner had been desecrated in turn, the tables had been turned.

"We haven't even killed these monsters, and already we have claimed their banner! We're off to a good start!" The Count exclaimed as he chuckled, and then heartily laughed.

"I don't understand this obsession with flags," Maximilian muttered.

"Wait a minute, don't you have to kill fifty Orcs to claim a king's banner?" A cheeky

Ranger added. “Now the captain can’t hope to keep up.”

The other Rangers all laughed upon hearing this. Still, the worry remained evident upon their faces. Even if they appreciated the First Prince’s gallant wit, they could not overcome the Warlord’s overbearing presence. Suddenly, a war horn, the horn of victory, sounded across the walls.

It was the First Prince, and he blew into it once more, several short blasts followed by a long one.

“Silent are the snowy mountain peaks and the blood-drenched walls.”

One of the knights now began to hum the song of war, and the rhythm of the verse corresponded to the blows of the horn. It was then that the knights recognized the true intention of the First Prince. They summoned their rings and began to sing the poem of war. Once more, the horn sounded, the sound itself strengthened by mana. The Wire Knights joined in song, and then the Black Lancers. Soon the tremendous sound of horn and song reverberated across the snowy fields and within the mighty walls. Hundreds of knights added their voices as the crushing presence of the Warlord gradually lifted from the souls of all. The First Prince relaxed his shoulder, no longer tense after seeing the success of his ploy.

“Adrian is surely busy today.” The Count’s voice was filled with pure admiration. Even if he had given a great speech, he would not have been able to bolster morale in such a fashion. Auras flowed freely into blades as the presence of the First Prince negated that of the Warlord.

“I think it is time to return the favor,” Count Bale Balahard stated as he took up a spear. He let the power of his four rings flow freely, took a deep breath, and threw the weapon. Its momentum matched that of the Warlord’s own thrust as the spear plunged into the Orcish ranks, killing dozens of them in a single hit as mana crashed like a vengeful wave into the beasts.

At this point in time, Vincent gave a hand signal to those beneath the wall. Quéon Lichtheim nodded and raised his hand into the air.

The Black Lancers readied their javelins. Lichteim lowered his hand calmly, and one hundred black throwing spears ascended into the sky.

They reached the zenith of their arc and plunged into the foremost ranks of the Orcs

in a great, unified explosion of mana. The Orcs who were hit directly were torn asunder, while those within the radius of the shockwave were swept away. Several times the Black Lancers threw their javelins, the weapons striking into the horde of Orcs like thunder striking across open plains.

Not once did the Warlord falter. He continued to breathe deeply, his eyes clear and unwavering.

'Rud dud dud dud dud rud dud dud dud dud.'

Orcs started to beat upon their drums.

'Rud dud dud dud dud rud dud dud dud dud.'

Orcs started to march toward the walls.

'Rud dud dud dud dud rud dud dud dud dud.'

Their every step fell in rhythm with the unerring beat.

The rhythm had begun at a slow pace, almost a laid back pace, yet it picked up in tempo soon enough, higher and higher, louder and louder.

As it did, the pace of the Orcish charge also increased. And they roared. They roared.

Their footsteps resounded like thunder.

The strong walls trembled to such an extent that the snow was shaken from them.

"We have the range, we'll take care of them!"

Hundreds of Rangers took up positions along the wall.

"Draw!"

The Rangers clenched their teeth in the face of the dark green tsunami bearing toward them.

"Fire!"

They let loose as one man. The sound of strings twanging and bolts whirring came as a single thrum as hundreds of arrows darkened the sky.

Orcs in the vanguard fell to the ground in a torrent of pierced flesh and deathly wails. Those who survived were trampled to death by their onrushing comrades. Volley after volley was loosed until the Rangers had difficulty distinguishing live Orcs from the dead and until their hands were unfeeling and raw.

“Prepare the Daemon Bow!” A squad of royal infantry engineers removed a great piece of cloth that had kept the snow from the ballista’s inner workings.

“Fire!” As long and thick as a temple’s pillars, the deadly projectile sprang from the siege engine and tore through dozens of Orcs, rending them apart as they were thrust back under its immense momentum.

‘Rududu dudu dudu rududu dudu dudu.’

Despite the death that poured from Winter Castle’s walls, the advance of the Orcs had not been stemmed at all.

‘Hawooooooo… hawooooooo!’

The sound of lupine howling washed over the walls then as Wolf Riders appeared and came to the head of the dark green waves that stormed ever on.

“Focus on the riders!” bellowed Vincent, and crossbow and bow both turned to heed this command. Hundreds of missiles thudded into the loping forms of the Wolf Riders. The beasts that were hit howled their pain as they crashed to the earth. Still, more wolves gained the wall than those that were felled. The wolves slammed into the walls and ran up their vertical surface. Two-thirds of the way up, as their paws started to slide off the frozen stone, the riders on their backs leapt from their mounts as they threw their siege hooks.

Some of these hooks were severed in flight by knights, yet there were far too many that clanged into the ramparts. The Wolf Riders vaulted onto the walls in the next instant. Soldiers and knights thrust with spear and sword, yet the Orcs had their back turned to their foe. Every single Orc had its back pierced, yet their goal was accomplished: They had sacrificed themselves to latch ladders woven from thick sinew onto the battlements.

Hundreds of these ladders now freely hung all along the wall. Knights realized the peril that these ladders posed and summoned mana into their swords, intent at severing the things. Hundreds of javelins flew from the ranked Orcs before the knights could even begin to remedy the threat. Rangers who had been firing were pierced in their droves by these spears. Some of the exiled and junior knights, not used to war, fell to these missiles as well. Only in a scant few places had the defenders been able to sever the ladders.

Rangers who had been on the edge of the wall now made their retreat as Orcs began to ascend the ladders. Knights moved from section to section in their frantic drive to cut through the siege ladders, while Orcs threw spears and axes from below to keep these very ladders intact.

Orc Warriors inevitably gained the walls. “Knights! Engage the Orc Warriors!” At Vincent’s command, the knights rushed forward as they formed their lines.

“Rangers, keep firing! Infantry, cut those ladders!” Rangers bravely neared the edge of the walls, fired into the climbing Orcs, and retreated a few steps back to reload, repeating this tactic whenever they could. The Orcs who were pierced by the arrows plummeted to the ground below.

One Ranger tarried too long and had his head split open by a thrown ax. Infantrymen and Rangers died as spear and ax pierced them.

“Well then,” was all that Bale Balahard could say as he spat upon the ground. The situation looked grim. Their defense was faltering.

The Orcs had employed their usual siege tactics, yet their sheer weight in numbers had overwhelmed the defenders.

The amount of thrown axes and spears, the number of ladders and hooks… the entire scale of the siege was far greater than ever before. So too were the mounting casualties among the men who held the wall.

“Pour it!”

Rangers obeyed as they upended vast cauldrons of oil onto the Orcs who hugged the walls below.

“Fire!”

Flaming arrows met oily Orcs. So great was the inferno that flames licked the very top of the ramparts as the Orcs screeched terribly, the flesh cooking from their bones. Some of the ladders caught fire, and many Orcs were driven from the walls by knight and infantryman in the resultant chaos.

“They have poured the oil too early,” Adrian stated as he stared at the flaming, thrashing Orcs. “They should have used it as a last resort, to give our men reprieve if they get pinned down.”

“With the sheer number of Orcs and the damage the fire did, well, there was no other choice,” Vincent stated his excuse, one that the First Prince did not see as valid.

“Perhaps,” replied Adrian. “But if you continue such a reckless waste of resources, we’ll be fighting the Orcs naked before the week is done.”

Under the walls, the Orcs were waiting for the fires to peter out.

“The situation is bad.” At these words from Adrian, the faces of the commanders darkened.

During this first day of battle, forty-eight Rangers, thirty-four Infantrymen, and seven Apprentice Knights had lost their lives.

A total of four-thousand arrows and bolts had been loosed.

Fifty cauldrons of oil had been poured.

Meanwhile, the Orcish horde remained countless.

CHAPTER 64
I BECAME THE FIRST PRINCE (1)

"I'm standing next to a bastard and I've been drenched in shit."

Bernardo Eli thought that this was the perfect phrase to describe his current predicament. He stood beside the eldest son of the Count, the very man who had uttered those words. He had at first thought it to be an overreaction to being splattered by some mud, yet it did not take long for him to realize that it had been blood, not dirt. Bernardo had brought his sins with him, as he had been exiled due to the other nobles' resentment. That was why he had stood with the other sinners, the other exiles.

The fall of his family had been regrettable, as had been the royal family's desire to appease noble hearts, for this desire had led to him becoming a political sacrifice. But what could he do? To be powerless was a sin as well. He was surely not going to have a quiet life in his new home. As if this would be atonement for all his wrongdoings!

The north was bloodier than he had expected. Once every four days, the Orcs besieged them. The north was a place where one couldn't tell when, where, and how death would strike.

Half of the infantry had died in the first two weeks after arriving. Some had their heads had cleaved open by axes while others had tumbled to their deaths from the walls. No one seemed to care about these deaths. Youths who had once been nobles were thrown onto corpse piles alongside monsters, their bodies incinerated and turned to ash. Sinners still had the urge to survive, yet the north demanded more than willpower when survival was concerned.

After a month, all the exiled nobles had perished.

Bernardo was the only survivor.

The Mana Heart training and sword skills drilled into him by his family had saved his life. These things were his only lifeline, and he refused to give up despite his family's

fall from grace. He even held a hope that he could safely end his exile. However, this thrice-damned frozen land was a place that trampled human hopes by default. This brutal truth was more evident now that a new monster, a King of the Orcs, had besieged the castle with 20,000 Orcs. When faced with the mighty presence of that beast, he felt as if the pressure was crushing his soul. When the Warlord's banner had struck the spire, his despair had deepened, and his future seemed grim and ominous.

It was then that he saw a familiar boy climbing the tower. He had braved the frozen stones in his ascent, severed the Orcish banner, and raised it high for all to see. In the instant that Bernardo had seen this brave display, hope had bloomed to displace his despair. The sound of a victory horn had rung out, and the knights had begun to sing a strange song. Mana flowed freely through the air, and the terror that had been squashing his soul had gradually receded.

It was only then that Bernardo realized that the boy who had given him hope had been the one who had exiled him to this bloody place. His resentment had flared up, then. Here he was, struggling for life and death on the wall, and no one even cared.

What a vile and twisted world. What a damnable life.

Complaining never helped anyone, though. The Orcs were advancing. The Rangers had fired volley after volley into them, yet this did nothing to stem the great green tide that swept over the snow. Orcs on wolves had gained the wall, and many of their ladders were still in place.

"Arrows!" Shouted the Ranger before him. Bernardo made to hand him the arrows, but the Ranger suddenly stiffened. A spear was protruding from the man's back, and he plunged over the walls. A giant Orc's head appeared where the Ranger had so recently been. Bernardo drew his sword and channeled mana into it. He swung at the Orc, who blocked his strike with its own redly glowing sword. The Orc now prepared to strike at him, and Bernardo realized that he had no space to dodge among the clamor of bodies. The exile was in trouble and desperately looked around for someone who could help him.

Suddenly, a Ranger lacking one arm and with his eyes gouged out slammed into the Orc, plunging a dagger into its chest. Both tumbled from the wall. Bernardo then saw a knight surrounded by Orcs, three spears protruding from his back.

Bernardo despised death. He bared his teeth and struck at the Orc once more, and once more, his strike was parried. Bernardo gave up then and closed his eyes. He wished that his death would be painless.

A squelching sound battered his ears. Had he been decapitated? Was he stabbed through the chest or stomach? Countless such scenarios pulsed through his mind, yet he felt no pain. Perhaps his death had been instantaneous, and he felt relieved at this. He was glad that his had been a clean death.

“What!? Why are your eyes closed, soldier? Just where do you think you are, the bloody beach?” A hand smacked into the back of his head, and he opened his eyes in shock. “Are you with the Wire Knights? Someone has sent an untrained whelp onto the walls!” Prince Adrian, drenched in blood, was yelling at him, his face contorted in anger.

“I… Well, Your Majesty!”

“Wake up! Ready your sword! If you can’t fight, leave the wall! You’re only getting in our way,” the Prince chided him, already moving on. As the First Prince made his way along the wall, Orcs were felled in droves before him.

“Pour it!”

Rangers upended great cauldrons of oil over the monsters, and flaming arrows ignited the fuel. The fire raged beneath the walls. Bernardo knew that if he had such cauldrons, he would have used them from the start. As the last Orc to gain the wall got beheaded, he backed away.

He could see Prince Adrian talk with the Count and his son some distance away. The Prince had not recognized him. The unfairness of this was felt stronger than his relief at having survived. He had been hovering around the Prince for some time now, hoping to be recognized. It was a really stupid idea, seeing as the Prince was normally found in the most perilous areas of any battle. Perhaps he was childish, though he could always make a comeback, and Prince Adrian always pushed through, refusing to give up.

The Orcs claimed the eastern wall, with countless people having died and more dying every minute. The eastern wall had become a realm of the dead and dying.

The Prince rushed into that terrible carnage.

“Fall back! Those who can, tend to the wounded!” Adrian cried out as he cut down Orcs, left and right. Rangers who could not run away stumbled into the battle. The Prince moved ever on as the number of Orcs increased. The First Prince became more wounded, yet more and more soldiers were saved by his blade as he did.

“You fools, don’t fight, fall back!” Even as he said this, the Rangers, seeming to have lost any semblance of common sense, continued to fight the Orcs despite their bruised and battered bodies. Many Rangers grabbed onto Orcs and pushed themselves over the walls in a last desperate attempt at killing the monsters. Bernardo could not help but wonder at their selfless sacrifice.

Why were these men so desperate? Many other men would discard all that they stood for, all their values, to survive. “Keep at it!” Bernardo shouted. Suddenly, he got shoved to one side, sprawling onto the ground as he groaned his confusion.

“This stupid child again!” Adrian shouted, and it took only a moment for Bernardo to realize who had saved him once again from certain death. “If you are going to stand about idling, I’d rather you put your head down!” Once more, the exiled feeling felt more prominent than the relief, for Prince Adrian had still not recognized him. ‘I came to this hell because of you,’ Bernardo thought as he grabbed his sword and clenched his jaw.

“If you’re going to fight, then do it right, Eli!”

“Hu… Huh!?” Bernardo turned to the Prince, but he had already moved on. “You remembered me…” he muttered.

“He has known you since he saw you. He just chose to say nothing on the matter.” The clear, calm voice was at odds with the chaos of battle. The man who had spoken stood beside the exile. “If you wish to fight, then fight. Otherwise, flee to the courtyard,” the high priest said as he readied his sword and went after the Prince. Orcs were swarming like angry hornets around the two men and two women.

“Damn them, why do they keep telling me to run away!?” Bernardo set his jaw and readied his blade. “I shall follow the First Prince to the very ends of the deepest hells! Even if I die, I would still follow!” Bernardo bellowed. His heart thundered in his chest, and he knew that a new chapter had begun in his life. New aspirations that even he had been unaware of flowed from his words.

Bernardo Eli and his extraordinarily bright blade rushed into the Orcs.

* * *

“Ah… oh…”

Bernardo was utterly exhausted, not even being able to lift his hand. If an Orc appeared at that very moment to rush at his throat, he wouldn’t even have the energy to scream. Fortunately, not a single Orc remained upon the walls. Not a living Orc, at least.

As Bernardo bent forward to catch his breath, he stared straight into a pair of bloodied boots. He looked into the face of their bloodied owner as the Prince stared down at him in turn.

“You say that you shall follow me, even into death?”

It seemed that even in the tumult of battle, Adrian had heard Bernardo’s cry.

“Wherever you go, I shall follow.”

The Prince nodded and turned around. “Let’s go over there, then.”

Bernardo stared blankly before him for a few seconds before the voice broke into is his ear canals. A woman possessing great beauty even under the layers of sweat, blood, and filth that covered her body followed the Prince along with Bernardo.

“From this day on, you have chosen to be in service to His Majesty the First Prince. You are no longer part of the royal army. If you don’t like that, tell me now. His Majesty has stated that he would never force someone into his service,” the woman instructed him. He now recognized her as the woman who had been harassed by a drunkard the other day. It had been the eldest son of Baron Balson, who the Prince had summarily discharged. He had eventually died from a weak and anxious heart, remaining a cheap and uncouth bastard to the very end.

If he still lived, Bernardo himself would have plunged a blade through his throat.

So there was Bernardo: A Scion of the Eli line, a family who had stubbornly clung to the use of Mana Hearts throughout the centuries. In Winter Castle, he had found a master to whom he had pledged his blade. He had also found a partner who he grew

to love instantly, though that love would remain unrequited to the end.

* * *

The following is an account of the siege of Winter Castle. The author, Niccolo Marchiadel, had tried his best to give an objective account after witnessing the siege with his own eyes:

『The 1st day of siege: The King of the Orcs, named the Warlord, had led a large force of 20,000 Orcs to the fields around the castle. Even veteran mercenaries downed their weapons when faced with the overbearing presence of the beast. The Warlord had sundered the banner of Balahard with his own. He had thrust it onto the highest tower of the castle. First Prince Adrian Leonberger had ascended this tower and claimed the Orcish banner as his own. He had then blown the horn of victory. Soldiers entered into a battle song after taking heart at the Prince's display.

The Orcs charged, and the siege began in full when Wolf Riders gained the battlements and attached ladders. This first wave of Orcs was driven off after a brave display by the soldiers. 50 cauldrons of oil had been set alight to ravage the enemy further.』

『Total Casualties Report: Deaths-89, including seven apprenticed knights / Wounded-114』

『The 2nd day of siege: Orcs attacked just before dawn. Their siege tactics were the same as before. The Winter Knights and Wire Knights had used their rings and were able to drive the Orcs off. However, the number of Orcs that yet remained was great indeed.』

『Total Casualties report: Deaths-114 / Wounded-240』

『The 3rd day of siege: Orcs constantly climbed and gained the walls. The Silver Fox mercenaries and the troops of the royal army fought on this day, giving the forces of Balahard time for some much-needed rest. However, these men struggled to hold the walls, and so easily had they been beaten back, the castle almost fell. After this poor display, the Rangers remained on the walls every day of the siege.』

『Total Casualties report: Deaths-294 / Wounded-None, for the Orcs killed them to a

man』

『The 4th day of siege: The Orcs captured the eastern wall. It was regained at the cost of the lives of many Rangers. The first knight lost his life on this day. Sir Lidoval Arnaim had been a cheerful knight that I had met personally on a few occasions. The Rangers were all exhausted after this day, and the number of defenders greatly lessened.』

『Total Casualties report: Deaths-371, mostly Rangers / Wounded-114』

『The 6th day of siege: Today, His Majesty, the Second Prince, had sustained wounds in battle. The call for a retreat from the wall had been rung, yet Prince Maximilian had remained until the end. His Majesty, the First Prince, had also suffered major and minor injuries. No one had advised him to retreat. I had asked why, and they had told me that he would not have listened to their sage advice.

The scions of the Leonberger line were fighting like young lions, true soldiers. The morale of the knights soared in the face of the resolve that the Princes showed. However, the number of foes was too great to remedy the breach in full.

『Total Casualties report: Deaths-224 / Wounded-199』

『The 13th day of siege: Talk of retreat had been heard for the first time during the council's sitting. Count Balahard had strongly objected to such talk』

『More than 300 warriors had died, too many to count』

『The 15th day of siege: No sign of reinforcements. We are truly alone.』

CHAPTER 65
I BECAME THE FIRST PRINCE (2)

“If we continue along this path, we will be annihilated. You have to retreat and reorganize the troops.” Both Maximilian and Ehrim Kiringer had proposed a retreat.

“Never!”

“We cannot abandon our castle!”

The Count, his son, and the other commanders had all spoken as one, crying out that retreat was impossible.

“It would be folly to continue facing such casualties until we are all dead. There is nothing to be gained by our destruction.” Ehrim had calmly laid out the disadvantages of holding the walls, stressing the need for retreat and regrouping.

“It is not about victory, or defeat.” Vincent ran his hand over the map. “Do you know why we Balahards had built our fortress in this desolate place? This is the only pass that the monsters can use to march south out of the Blade’s Edge Mountains.”

Ehrim tried to respond, but Vincent spoke on. “If the monsters pass beyond this castle, they can go anywhere. No one knows whether they will head southwest or southeast. They might even march directly south. If we retreat, where the hell do we retreat towards?” Vincent ran his finger to the south of Winter Castle. Six provinces bordered the lands of Balahard. All of them had armed forces to meager to face the Warlord’s army. If Winter Castle fell, hell would soon be unleashed upon some of these provinces.

“Why do you persist in your folly!? The reinforcements who are yet to arrive do not know what dire straits we face!” Shouted Maximilian. It was the first time I had heard such strong emotions flow from him. “I have forgotten what this winter is. I have forgotten the harshness of this season.”

It was the people of Balahard, who had protected their holdings for many generations, who now faced obliteration. “Have you ever…” Maximilian started to ask

but trailed off.

“Did Your Majesty not bring us a legion to aid us this time? Two, in fact,” the Count said with a laugh. The commanders of the reinforcements shut their mouths at this, not daring to speak. They had realized how lonely the men of Winter Castle had truly been in their centuries-long guardianship of the north. In this barren, forgotten land, these men had been fighting an eternal war. In all probability, this was not the first great crisis these soldiers had faced.

“Damn it! Damn it all!” Maximilian swore, looking so different than before. The previously calm and meek Prince could no longer reign in his true feelings. As for me, I had seen so much death that it had made me more uncaring and callous than before. The battlefield was not likely to let a moral and hale Prince maintain a healthy mind.

“Still your mind,” I told my brother as I grasped his shoulder.

“Brother…” His kind eyes bore into me, and I saw a mix of grief and self-confidence within them.

“I have no intention of surrendering the castle at present,” the Count said as he glanced at Vincent.

“Yet if we prolong this siege, many more soldiers will lose their lives upon our walls. We ride out at dawn,” Vincent stated, placing his finger on the largest enemy banner on the map. “We ride to slay the Warlord,” he added as he toppled that banner with his hand. “If we cut the head off this snake, it can no longer poison us.”

Ehrim Kiringer frowned at this. “The enemy has at least seven remaining corps outside the walls. At least three of those must be broken through to reach the Warlord. Is that possible?”

“I will lead the vanguard and open the way,” my Uncle said, and his commanders eagerly lent their aid to him.

“The Black Lancers are with you, my Lord,” Quéon almost roared.

“We hundred knights of Balahard as well.”

“All of the Balahard Heavy Infantry Corps shall join your charge!”

Count Bale Balahard accepted some of these offers at aid and rejected others.

“I shall participate as well,” Maximilian said as he raised his hand.

“No, you’re out. It is best if only one of Leonberger’s blood participates. If I were to be the cause of both of your deaths…”

“Hey, Uncle, just remember to leave me my spot,” I added, yet he ignored me. He knew that even if he had forbidden me, I would still have joined him.

“Those who remain should hold the walls and prepare for the worst eventuality.” As Bale Balahard spoke these words, the atmosphere in the conference room became very grim indeed. It was only then that many of those gathered realized what it truly meant to charge at the Warlord. It was certain that, even if the charge failed, a full-scale retreat was not an option. To retreat would be to become complicit in the genocide of the neighboring provinces. Maximilian and his officers looked toward me as if asking whether they were truly to remain behind. I just shrugged, and with that, the meeting came to an end. One by one, the commanders left the hall.

“Adrian,” my Uncle called to me as I was about to leave. “Whatever happens, think about surviving above all else.” I blinked, never having expected to hear such words from him. Complicated feelings flowed through me, then.

“You also take care of yourself, Uncle. When we fought the Night Slayer…”

“The defense of Winter Castle is the fate of the Balahards to bear, not yours,” he stated in no unclear terms as he met my eyes.

“I know, Uncle. Rest well and we shall see one another on the morrow.”

I left the hall as swiftly as I could. Once outside, I slapped my hands over my cheeks, trying to clear my thoughts. My mind flashed crazily with them. Now was not the time to be overtaken by emotions. I found Antoine, captain of the Silver Foxes, as he left the hall as well.

“Your Majesty.” He had already decided to entrust his fate to my hands. His decision was solely based on his desire for the coveted Muhunshi poems.

“Antoine, hear me well and with care,” I said as he straightened his posture. I laid out some of my plans to him, then. Upon hearing my words, his eyes had widened, and

his face had become expressionless.

“What, lost for words, mercenary?”

“No, but… Then, Your Majesty…” After quite some time, he could only roll his eyes in frustration.

“Don’t worry about maintaining a conservative comportment. Go to her. Her name is Arwen Kirgayen. I had left money with her to pay you, just in case.”

“If you say so,” he said without question, saving me the time to explain things further to him. As I made to leave, he grabbed my arm.

“Your Majesty.”

“What?”

“Good luck.” I waved my hand roughly at him, the stern expression on my face never wavering. I still had a lot to do.

“Your Majesty, please know that I will always be there for you.” I was now speaking with Ehrim Kiringer, and his response to my various plans and orders had been much the same as Antoine’s. “If my name is upon it, it will not work. Whether you use Maximilian’s name or my Uncle’s, just make sure it gets done.”

“I will do whatever is necessary, Your Majesty.”

I laughed in joy at his trustworthy answer then turned around as to leave him. He called after me. “Your Majesty!” I glanced back at him. “If… When you return from this mission, the Wire Knights shall stand behind you, no matter what.”

“Is that so?” I gave him a casual wave and left the barracks. After that, I spoke to a great many people, including Nicollo and Vincent. There were words with my brother, Maximilian, as well.

“I shall continue to record everything diligently, to ensure that Your Majesty’s efforts are not in vain and that your legend shall echo through the ages.”

“I am not dead yet, dear Nicollo.”

“Ah yes, that is correct. A knight may fall upon the field of battle, yet his will and spirit never truly die.”

As we spoke, his quill scratched my every word upon his parchment. Even if he verbally called bullshit to my statements, he recorded them perfectly all the while. I knew that the records left by this old scholar would be of great aid to future generations.

“We Balahards will never abandon our castle.”

“Remember, if you keep the knights in the rear, it shall not be easy to tear through the lines of Goblins and Orcs. One needs officers in the van, only then can true damage be dealt.”

Vincent constantly contested my words while I patiently tried to persuade him. Eventually, he conceded that he would consider my advice if worst came to worst. Even if he was not fully pleased with my strategies, I had to leave things as they were. It was probably for the best.

“Why did you not tell us these things in the conference?”

“I don’t want to fire blindly and in so doing snuff out candles that have not yet lit the bonfire.”

“You yourself act as a great signal fire for the men, Your Majesty.”

I could not help but laugh heartily at Vincent’s words.

“Your Majesty, you shall charge at the Warlord with two-hundred blades behind you.”

He continued, saying that he wished for me to come back alive and that I should bear a banner in triumph upon my return. My heart was warmed at the sincerity of his words. Before I left him, I stated that I would make sure to comply with his request.

As I made my way through the castle halls, I caught sight of a familiar woman as she stared at me from afar. I approached her.

“Arwen.”

“Your Majesty,” she said with a stern and determined expression. At her unspoken

words, I immediately hit her with an unwavering rejection.

“No. We still have a lot of work that has to be done.”

She groaned at my words, yet I pressed on.

“It is because of you that I can go to perilous places at will. Do you wish for me to take my troubled heart and charge into that horde of Orcs? Is that truly your wish, Arwen?”

“No, Your Majesty.” The horror that my words had invoked in her sullied her young features. As I studied her, I thought that my decision might have been very cruel to her.

However, I knew that there was no other way. I only had two true knights in my service, and one of them was a fickle maniac. In the end, I could trust only Arwen with my future.

“Heed my request, Arwen.” She closed her eyes at my words, yet her lips supplied me with the answer that I sought. “Yes… Yes! I will do it.”

I left her then, yet paused a few meters away from her. “That being said, even if I were to die, I would never allow you to die, dear Arwen. Never think that all of this had been a useless endeavor.”

I went to my rooms, passing many dour and silent men. I now had one last important task ahead of me, which was to get some much-needed sleep. As I settled into my room, a guest entered.

It was Maximilian.

“Brother.” I frowned upon seeing him. “It was my attention to rest, Maximilian.”

He regarded me for a while, almost with sorrow in his eyes. “Please return safely from the charge,” he finally said. I could not count upon my fingers the number of people who had asked this of me on that single day. “If you return safely-”

“I’ll be back alive, brother. If you have anything else to say, wait for me to return. We shall speak then.”

He nodded his understanding. “That would be for the best. I know you will survive and return to us.” He bowed deeply to me as he stood. “Then, have a peaceful night, Adrian,” he bade me as he left.

“Really, they all act as if I’m already dead,” I muttered as I shook my head. It was then that a strange sensation crept into my spine. Upon realizing that I had felt it before, I frowned deeply. “If you are here, stop spying on me. Show yourself.”

The Elder High Elf’s messenger popped through the window. I had sensed its presence correctly. Ah, it had taken the form of an owl again.

“I have been waiting for some time, as to order my thoughts,” Sigrun’s voice entered my head telepathically.

“Hm. That must be hard for you,” I said, not showing the slightest surprise at her sudden presence. “I had in fact called to you some time ago, yet I see you always like to be fashionably early.”

I spoke half-truths, yet I had truly been expecting her messenger.

CHAPTER 66
I BECAME THE FIRST PRINCE (3)

As twilight settled over the realm, two-hundred knights stood before the gate. In front of these men was my heavily armed and armored Uncle.

“Hey Uncle, you look quite good with all your armor on.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

He would soon be hurtling into a horde of 14,000 Orcs, yet his voice was calmer than ever before. The other knights seemed to share his blissful mien. Their heavy helms obscured the Black Lancers’ faces, yet one could see their confidence by studying their stance. I was troubled by only a moderate amount of tension. Count Bale Balahard seemed anxious to throw open the gates and commence the charge.

“Your Majesty!” A knight sporting many wounds came over to me and handed me the reins of a horse, a great white charger. I mounted it from one side, my ass settling right into the saddle. “This is a precious, pure-blooded horse of the north unafraid of monsters,” the mounted knight proudly stated as he tugged on the reigns, showing off the animal’s head.

“Make sure you both survive. You both deserve medals.”

I nodded sternly, yet I could not help but laugh at how consistent the northerners were at times. The man was Quéon Lichtheim, captain of the Black Lancers, and he snuck his horse through to a spot right beside his Count. “That’s the place,” my Uncle said in a patronizing tone as he looked down at me. He smiled at Quéon’s antics, a smile that did not fit the situation. His breathing became more controlled.

I could feel many eyes boring into my back, yet I did not bother to turn my head. What would the faces of these observers look like, and what would they say? I did not want to know. The aspirations and longings contained within their fawning gazes had only made me dizzy before.

“Your Majesty,” a thin voice broke through the clamor. It was Adelia. Unfortunately,

my most adored sword would not be at my side. Her nature did not fit the situation. I had tried to include her in such a charge once when at first, the Warlord had come. Even then, I had suggested that we charge straight at him, yet the northern lords had not one shared my desire. I knew that today, as we made ready to dig into the middle of the enemy camp and kill their leader, there was no place for Adelia.

I could not even ride a horse properly, so how would I be able to stop her if she decided to run wild? No, it was likely that she would get herself killed.

“Your Majesty, please stay safe.” Her expression seemed to alter within every second; her uncertainties were written plain upon her face. I had almost bitten my lip then, yet caught myself just in time and rather let my eyes drop from hers. Adelia was struggling between the feelings of [Caring] and [Servility]. If her [Butcher] or [War Mania] traits had been active, she would doubtlessly have followed me into battle.

However, I did not want her to face her doom here. Not her, who had inherited such a talent with the sword. “I’ll return, Adelia, and that you will see with your own eyes.”

I bowed and patted her shoulder. I could hear wolf-whistles sound from many knights as the men buffeted us with crude jokes.

“Hah! The fine things that certain men get to have, we of the north lack!”

“Yes, I am so envious.”

The knights continued to giggle and laugh, yet their laughter did not last long. The sound of gears turning and pulleys being wound up filled the courtyard. The great pulleys of the gate started to turn slowly but surely, and the smell of lubricating oils stabbed at my nose.

“Open the gates.” The soldiers who reeled in the mighty chains continued their hard labor upon my Uncle’s command. They were all worried, yet to their credit suppressed such feelings to focus rather upon their duty.

The gates groaned as they rose, inch by inch. A snowy field littered with the dead was slowly revealed beyond the gates. “Tug harder,” exclaimed Vincent as he watched from the walls. The soldiers grunted their response as they reeled in the chains with greater vigor.

During this time, great wheels of wicker and rags, drenched in oil, had been put in

position. Just as the gates finally ground open, dozens of these wheels were rolled onto the open field before us.

“Ignite them!” Rangers fired blazing arrows, and each rolling wheel caught fire.

“Charge!” shouted my Uncle, and two-hundred knights spurred their horses on by hitting their flanks. The Orcs who had lingered before the gates screamed in terror as the fiery rings slammed into them. Two-hundred horses thundered in the wake of the flames.

“Fire!”

Arrows flew into the sky as the men upon the walls roared. All these missiles thudded into the foe at once, screaming Orcs dying in their droves. Hooves trampled over these fresh corpses as they charged on. At last, we reached a point outside of the Rangers’ and our siege weapons’ range. The fiery wheels had also lost their momentum.

There was no more covering fire to shield us from the awaiting monsters. From here on out, we had had to cleave our path through the horde. I heard the sound of bolts being cocked. The Black Lancers held crossbows. As one man, they shot their bolts from our flanks.

Roaring Orcs were felled under this barrage. The Black Lancers abandoned their crossbows and readied their lances. My Uncle lifted his sword into the sky. A blue flash erupted from it, slamming a bloody path through the green horde before us. More Orcs rushed in as they tried to block us off. The Black Lancers spurred their mounts on into a rapid charge. They readied their lances under their shoulders, hunching forward as they prepared themselves.

One-hundred finely forged cavalry lances pierced the Orcish ranks. Blood sprayed in showers as limbs were torn violently from their sockets. The Black Lancers charged on, trampling the Orcs. By the time our vanguard had lost its impetus, the surviving Orcs had been greatly shaken by this display. The horse that I rode gave an excited whinny as it lowered its posture. It felt like an invisible hand was guiding my mount ever onward. I passed the lancers who had lost their momentum, and soon new Orcs barred my passage.

My Uncle spread his knights out and held his ground. A new wave of Orcs rushed at

us but was met by the Winter Knights' short throwing hatchets. The monster ranks collapsed as these thrown axes thudded into them. Our tactics were organic, and the knights evinced great levels of excitement. Poetry blossomed, and hundreds of rings resonated in response.

A new path was being paved right before my eyes.

We continued to advance at a brisk pace until finally, we had reached our destination.

In the center of all these Orcs, the tallest banners flapped in the wind. Here was the king of all the dark green clans, here was the hero of the Orcs.

I had arrived before the Warlord.

Orc guards blocked our passage, and they were determined not to let us pass. With their swords and spears glowing red with their fervor, they roared as they charged at us.

"We're going to break through!" exclaimed my Uncle. Even before he had said this, the Black Lancers had already readied themselves for another charge. Their mighty spears now crashed into the ranks of Orc guards. They hit a brick wall, yet many Orcs still died. The lancers vaulted off their mounts, spearing Orcs as they jumped. In the next moment, midnight-black horses started to die, some falling onto their riders. The surviving Black Lancers jumped over the carnage, their blue-glowing spears clashing with the Orcs' red energies. This scene was played out all along the lines.

Slowly, step by step, the red curtain of Orcs was torn and beaten back.

Beyond the battle sat the dark green monarch upon his throne of bones and skulls. He stood as he held a spear, not seeming troubled by our presence in the least manner. A terrible, ominous feeling shook me to my very core. I clenched my teeth and forced my mouth to open, the poem's verse streaming from my tongue. Numerous resonating rings lent their power to mine.

Once more, my Uncle extended his sword, and brilliant light, brighter than any I had ever seen, exploded from its tip. There followed a tremendous explosion as white snow was scattered under the force of the shock waves. I charged into this new foggy world without hesitation. I then charged towards the point where blue and red lights flickered the most.

The flame of my true soul then began to burn.

I vaulted off my horse and struck out with my blade. One of the red traceries of light slammed back and met my sword. My eyes became blurry at the moment at the shock of seeing internal organs pouring to the ground in a sickly rain. The sky and the earth became as one in the periphery of my vision. I placed Twilight on the ground and raised my body. My ears thudded as if I were many leagues under the blackest ocean. I could not stand that feeling as I swiped at the corner of my mouth. Then, I fixed my sword before me once more and thrust it at the sky.

The blue flame that had been extinguished within me flared up once more. As I readied my blade, something passed in front of me. It was a jet-black horse.

After that, these dark mounts passed me by one by one, countless times. The Black Lancers were charging. One of these men dismounted, and his face shouted so silently into mine. He looked familiar to me… Was he Quéon Lichtheim? The commander of the Black Lancer stared at me with only one eye. I stared at him blankly before I realized something. He did not have only one eye open by choice; no, his other socket was empty. His brow was torn, and his face spasmed at frequent intervals.

He grabbed me violently then, and my mind reeled as his rough hands closed around my neck.

“Your Majesty, the Prince!”

A harsh shout broke into my mind then, and I looked around in amazement. The Black Lancers and the Winter Knights were blocking the Orcs, stemming their tide. In the middle of the chaos and the carnage stood my Uncle and the Warlord.

My breath was almost knocked from me as I watched and felt red and blue fires collide and collapse, time after time, strike upon strike.

“Take this!” My Uncle bellowed as he was buffeted by the great battle fervor of the Warlord.

My confused mind was wrenched into clarity at once. “Go!” Quéon shouted as he slapped the back of my neck.

I staggered away from him, toward the center where the Count and the King battled.

“You’re late, Adrian!” My Uncle chided me. He looked hassled, almost pathetic as he shook the filth from his blade. The Warlord had reeled back after my Uncle had struck it with a rather intense blow. It felt as if I was being flayed alive by the Warlord’s great fervor. I mitigated his overwhelming presence by summoning the maximum amount mana that I could, spreading it over my entire body.

“I’m late, but let’s do this correctly from now on,” I shouted through my clenched teeth.

Then, we created a poem.

[The Poem of Winter] was born from my scant amount of karma, as well as the hopes and desires the Balahards had held throughout their long vigil in the north. My Uncle sang along full-breasted over the clamor of war as his rings rotated rapidly. In an instant, I banished his presence from my mind as a great martial spirit arose in its place. A blue flame enveloped Twilight. At that very moment, the aura of my Uncle’s blade, which had begun to peter out, flared brighter than ever before.

The Warlord slammed his weapon into the ground, a great wave of battle fervor crashing like a tsunami over the entire battlefield.

In that crimson realm, my Uncle and I fought like madmen.

In the end, I was defeated.

CHAPTER 67
I BECAME THE FIRST PRINCE (4)

We were not defeated yet, though I already knew how this would end. I was on the very cusp of running out of my damnable mana. Even to maintain my posture and endure the onslaught was difficult. My entire body ached, and my heart felt as if it would be split in twain at any moment.

“Come at me again, beast!” My Uncle waved his sword in wild arcs before him. The Warlord grabbed his sword and wrenched it back. It looked as if a wild beast was toying with the prey it had caught. Even while his hand bled, the Orc enjoyed wrenching the blade this way and then that way, pulling the Count after it like a staggering ragdoll.

“Adrian, it’s over. We’re done for.”

I was still trying to muster and maintain the flow of my mana lines, yet my Uncle interrupted me.

“Now, Adrian! Stop trying to reap poetry.”

His voice was a firm whisper that punctuated our desperate situation. He channeled his powers then, and as I let mine dissipate, the pain that had thundered in my breast began to fade away.

“Our plan seems to have come to naught, anyway.”

“Not yet, this is not over yet!” I shouted. I still had mythic poems within me, including [The Poetry of the True Dragon]. By fully unleashing this part of my soul, I could reverse the situation. I could do this; I knew that I definitely could do it.

“Uncle, it is not over!”

I did not get the chance to unleash my wrath. My Uncle’s fist, charged with mana, slammed into my stomach and my internal organs shuddered under the impact.

“Why?” I managed to sputter before my legs gave in, and I fell into his arms.

“From here on out, this fight is for me alone as the Veil of Winter.”

“What are you doing?” I asked as he propped my head against his shoulder.

“Someone needs to remain and take care of this mess. The difficult work, I leave to you, nephew.”

Someone picked me up in a bear hug from behind. “Sir Quéon, please, I…”

“Your Majesty, I have been dismissed from my Lord’s side,” he stated, his voice heavy and his suffering raw.

“What are you doing now?” I asked, trying to resist his strong grapple, yet not possessing enough strength.

“It was an honor serving you, Count Bale.”

“You gave me little trouble, Quéon. Now go!”

I gritted my teeth and tried to speak, yet only a whisper escaped my lips.

“What… what are you doing, lancer?”

Nobody answered me. I was on horseback, and the damnable Quéon Lichtheim had even tied me to the pommel of the saddle.

“Good luck, Quéon!”

“Honor to my Count Bale, honor to the Sword of Balahard!”

The Black Lancer bade his lord farewell and wheeled his mount away in a canter. I caught glimpses of my Uncle as we sped away. Orcs rushed onto his position, and he was soon buried in that dark green wave of monsters. All I could do was stare at that horrible scene. My body grew numb and cold as I beheld the horror. Knights who followed us in retreat, knights who had held the Orcs at bay while Queon had rescued me, fell one by one as they were pulled from their horses or peppered with missiles.

The knights leading our fleeing formation were also risking life and limb to clear a path for us. As we neared the castle, I saw that fewer than fifty of the original two-hundred knights still lived. Soon enough, less than thirty remained.

This realization wrenched at my soul, and I reached my hand out toward my waist. My fingers brushed over the rough texture of the trumpeting horn at my side. I released its clasp and brought its mouthpiece to my lips.

'Buhooooo… '

As we ran, I blew into that horn, yet so weak was the mana that remained that it did not resound with its usual power.

'Buhoooo… buhoooo… '

I blew into that horn until I became dizzy, all the while reciting countless war poems in my mind. A Wolf Rider was harrying our flanks and thrust his spear at me. I just blew into the horn, with that cold sensation continuously piercing my chest.

A new noise washed over the battlefield then, and it sounded as if a giant snake was hissing. The Wolf Rider erupted into screaming as he slammed into the ground, dead. Screams now erupted all around us as dozens of shadows appeared between the pursuing Orcs. Forest green cloaks fluttered in the winter wind as flashes of silver ended Orcish lives left and right.

It was the elves. Damn it, why now? Why did they choose to attack only now? My eyes became hazy, my head swooned.

Finally, the darkness came to claim me.

* * *

Bale Balahard turned toward his foe once he saw that Prince Adrian had left the battlefield with the Black Lancers.

"I thank you for waiting."

The Warlord merely gave a deep and guttural growl at his words. If there were any words in that growl, Bale did not understand them, yet their meaning was clear. The Warlord considered it a brief show of mercy; his arrogant face showed this all too

clearly. The peace lasted for only the shortest of whiles. The Orc's explosive nature quickly came to the fore as his hands, gripping the spear, started to glow red with battle fervor. While Bale felt exhausted, the King of the Orcs was still filled with great reserves of power.

Even in this most desperate of situations, Bale Balahard laughed in the face of death.

"Laughing comes so easily now! It feels like ages since my heart has felt this light." He knew that his responsibilities as commander and as Count were no more. It made him feel freer than ever before, and he was glad that he had given the knights the chance to escape from this monster.

It was a glorious last-stand for a Knight of Winter, for the keeper of the north.

The Warlord rushed at him, its spear ready to strike. Bale readied his blade as he summoned its aura. The spear's thrust was parried, and Bale's sword swung at the Warlord as if it had a mind of its own. The Warlord turned his spear in his hand and smacked the sword aside.

On any other Orc, such an attack would have shaken the beast to its core. The Warlord didn't even blink. Still, Bale's eyes were clear, and his body lithe. The tip of his sword was alive with an aura that shined brighter than ever before. Dozens of strikes and parries from both combatants followed one another in what seemed an instant.

"This feels so good!" Not one of the combatants could hide their excitement, even as they sought to end one another with every strike. The waves of fervor were parted like thin paper, and, at long last, the Warlord's skin was scratched. Still, Bale had taken many wounds to inflict this single cut.

The decisive difference between the combatants had been established. On the one side, there stood a tough, fleshy monster, and on the other was an elderly human. Bale Balahard bled the most and was hampered by so many old wounds. Still, Bale was not completely overwhelmed, for the mana streaming from his rings made up for the difference in bulk between him and the Orc. Four rings constantly resonated and strengthened his body. Then, the change occurred.

A strong current started to flow through the rings. At first, it was a simple line that connected them end to end. And then… It formed itself into a new ring entirely.

“Ah hah!”

A huge, impossible-seeming ring of energy rose from within Bale’s body. He felt ecstatic within that overwhelming torrent of energy.

He had become, at that moment, a penta-chain knight. It was the state that every Knight of Rings dreamed of attaining. He had reached the level of power he had always desired.

Bale loosely dangled his sword before him. The Warlord had stepped back instead of rushing in. His face had become a study in caution, for he too had felt the change.

Seeing the Warlord’s hesitation, Bale clucked his tongue and gave a grim little chuckle.

It would have been nice if this had happened earlier in their bout. The fervor of the Orc had reaped its grim harvest, as evidenced by the bloody and torn body of Bale Balahard.

The fifth ring gifted him with immense strength, yet he had little ability to employ it.

After all, what more could a body as broken as his withstand and dish out?

The probability of his imminent collapse greatly dampened the joy he held in his heart. At the moment, the sound of a far-away horn washed over the battlefield.

The tonality and rhythm were very familiar.

“I piled up green carcasses, raising myself a mountain!

Red streams flowed from it, as bloody nails.”

The song was sung very roughly as it resonated through his mind.

“I can still give this beast a small gift before I head on my way,” Bale chuckled.

He fixed his blade before him and spread out his legs as he adjusted his stance. The blue energy flashing from the tip of his sword increased in intensity by the second.

Then, the red energies summoned by the Warlord rose like a great wave threatening

to engulf the earth. It slammed into the blue barrier of the old man, the ground itself carrying the Orc's fell energies. It was as if a giant sword had cut from the heavens into a sea of glowing crimson. Bale held onto his blade, even as pain racked his entire body.

Here was the first and the last sword that Bale Balahard, penta-chain knight, had wielded and would ever wield.

Adrian, my nephew…

"For Your Majesty, the First Prince!"

The blue aura of the blade broke through that grim red sea.

* * *

Bert was the Count of Shurtol, a northern province. Ferocious nightmares have hounded Bert's spirit as of late, and all of them were caused by the mishaps that had taken place in the north.

Requests for reinforcement had come from the Balahards, the keepers of the northern pass. Bert had immediately dropped all else and started to recruit troops to aid his northern counterpart.

Before he had sent these troops north, though, other lords had come to his hall. They told him that it was all a political ploy by Bale Balahard and that he had forced a thousand pieces of gold from other lords without investing it into an army.

Bert refuted this rumor out of hand, seeing it as utterly absurd. He knew the nature of Count Balahard and gave little regard to such nonsense. He was on the cusp of sending his five-hundred infantrymen to Winter Castle.

Then, the second son of Count Guern spoke up: "The ambassador of the empire has advised my family to watch events unfold, rather than rush unheedingly into them."

There were many changes in the kingdom at that point, but to openly follow the advice of a foreign ambassador? Another lord gave his own account of the empire's opinion.

"He told me that the empire would be very sorry if somebody did not follow their

friendly advice. He even said that some might get… angry if we were to refuse such sage suggestions."

Upon hearing this, Bert had almost beaten the lord with his own hands for daring to speak such treason. However, he could not; his hands were tied.

The nobility of a poor and powerless province could not hope to go against an entire empire.

Count Bert knew all too well what happened to those who rebelled against stronger houses.

Even Count Eli, once called the greatest sword in the kingdom, had been forced to fall from grace by various agents from the empire and the kingdom alike.

Count Burt was not prepared for house Shurtol to follow a similar doomed path. He eventually relented and disbanded all the troops that he had meant to send north. He was able to shore up his financial losses through generous gifts that the Marquis of Montpellier had gifted to the Countess. Still, even with a barn full of treasure, his guilt and anxiety would not leave him.

His every night was filled with nightmares, and he knew he would never be at peace until he answered the plea from the Balahards. He once more gathered the northern nobles to his court.

"What if we send reinforcements, even at this late a hour?"

Several lords nodded their consent timidly, yet the heads of the powerful families made their voices thick and mocked the suggestion.

"Oh, oh, Count Shurtol. Why do you keep doing this to yourself? Even if we send these men, what do we gain from the endeavor? Nothing."

"Hmmm, yes, indeed. Two full legions from the capital had already gone to aid old Balahard. Adding his own forces to the count, he has a whopping three legions. That is six-thousand men. Beside, Balahard's men are known for being brave, so why the worry?"

They spoke without a care on the matter, their tones insulting Count Bert as if they were speaking to a child. Bert did not dare to evince his displeasure. Just because

these men were also Counts did not mean they were on an equal footing to him. They had real power behind them, the power of high-ranking lords, and they could easily make things difficult for the less able Count Shurtol.

Bert could only lament the state that the north now found itself in. He hoped that no misfortune would strike Winter Castle.

All his hopes, desires, and even prayers were in vain.

“A messenger arrives from Balahard!” the captain of the guard announced as he opened the doors to the hall.

“Hah, must be another request for support. That old Count should really stop relying on such cheap and very transparent trickery,” one of the Lords of another house sneered.

“Huh hah hah, let us just create one more reasonable excuse, then!” Count Ghurn piped up.

Bert raised his hands to call for silence in his hall. The guard captain was pale and had surely heard grim news. Count Bert’s heart thundered in his chest, his mind calling up many ominous premonitions.

“What message does the man bear?” Bert asked.

“You do not have to listen to his prattle! Just tell him-“

“Balahard has fallen!” The guard captain shouted before Count Ghurn could finish his dismissal. Count Ghurn opened his mouth wide, too shocked to even demand punishment for the captain’s interruption. “Winter Castle has fallen, and the whereabouts of Count Bale Balahard are unknown.”

“What!? What!?’

Shocked nobles all shouted as one as they jumped from their seats. In the next moment, a filthy man entered the hall, his clothes reeking and encrusted with filth.

“Ah bloody hell, who’s this then? Who are you to enter our noble hall? You dare to intrude without permission, peasant?” Count Ghurn was in full swing once more, despite having heard the dire news. The messenger did not even blink upon facing

the Count's petulant tirade.

No, his expression was set into one of ferocious determination, his jaw clenched. Somehow realizing that the momentum was against him, Count Ghurn took his seat as he belched greatly, the wine finally having met his guts. Bert's voice trembled as he addressed the messenger.

"Sir, you clearly are a Ranger of Balahard. What is the situation in those lands?"

Upon hearing this request, the Ranger started to shout out his message, almost retching with every word, like a poisoned man who would vomit blood at any moment.

"Third Legion casualties: Three-hundred and forty-three Rangers. Two-hundred and fifteen Heavy Infantrymen. Four-hundred and ninety-two Light Infantrymen."

The Ranger met the gaze of each and every noble, then, daring them to insult Winter Castle's honor but once.

"Seventy-nine Black Lancers have perished. Eighty-eight Winter Knights are no more."

The aristocrats who had been snapped from their stupor began to speak up once again, yet the Ranger soon ended their hasty need to make their voices heard.

"The accounting is not yet done!"

They could not help but shut their mouths and focus upon the Ranger. The direness of the news had finally gotten to them. Seeing them settle down, the Ranger continued, his voice rising in cadence with every report he gave.

"Royal Relief Force Casualties: One-hundred and ninety-eight Heavy Infantrymen! Three-hundred and twenty-three Light Infantrymen! One-hundred and seventy-two Archers. Sixty-four Templars of the Wire!"

Bert almost fainted, bringing his hand up to support his head.

"The final casualty: The Commander of the Third Legion! The Count of Winter Castle! Head of the Balahard family, Bale Balahard, keeper of the north!

Count Bert slumped back into his seat, his face ashen. The Ranger pressed on.

“Winter Castle has fallen to the monsters, they have captured it. Even now, the survivors are… are in full retreat.”

At this last statement, the voice of the Ranger had almost broken. Count Bert had begun to sob like a bereaved child.

“As a messenger to Count Vincent Balahard, I bring his words to the northern nobles!” The Ranger shouted once more.

“He… All the nobles in the north are to muster any and all troops that they can. Shore up your defenses and form up your lines. The nobles of the north must now be fully prepared to face the ten thousand monsters that are to march into their lands.”

CHAPTER 68
I FINALLY GOT USED TO THE WORLD (1)

Abandoning the fortress that their ancestors had guarded for centuries was no easy task for the men of Balahard. They had always believed that they would die protecting its walls; retreat was just not in their veins.

Nevertheless, they had no choice but to abandon Winter Castle with tears in their eyes.

The longer they stayed out of stubbornness, the more people would die protecting a position that was already lost, and the greater the victory of the Orcs would be.

So it came to be that both the reinforcements and the forces of Balahard forcibly left the castle walls.

The Orcs who had by now entered through the northern gate shadowed them as they retreated.

The situation was grim, as there seemed no way that the withdrawal could occur without further grievous losses.

It was then that the Silver Fox mercenaries came into play.

“Head this way!” Antoine bellowed, as his company had already managed to secure the retreat, as per Adrian’s instructions. Once the forces had made it through the southern gate, oil jars that had been buried under the ground were set alight. A great barrier of flame now enveloped the gate itself.

Still, the Orcs came rushing on through that inferno. Those that survived the searing temperature were easily picked off by Silver Fox archers that had already set up their firing lines to cover the retreat.

“That won’t keep the bastards long! Hurry it up!” Antoine urged the men who looked about them desperately. Even as he said this, more Orcs came pouring out, coming close to the rear ranks of fleeing men.

Still, even here, the mercenaries had laid traps, and every time the Orcs came too near, jars exploded beneath their feet. Still, the traps were crude improvisations and could not halt the Orcs indefinitely.

They did, however, gift the forces of Winter Castle the time to reform their ranks.

* * *

"How on earth did you get the time to prepare all of this?" Vincent Balahard demanded of Antoine.

"His Majesty the First Prince had instructed me to do so the day before the charge," the mercenary captain said. He and others now glanced at a nearby cart. Twenty knights surrounded the wagon, upon which sat a woman whose face was streaked by tears. Next to her, in the bed of the wagon, lay an unconscious and wounded boy. Both the First Prince and Adelia Bavaria had been brought in bloodied and wounded after the decisive battle.

It was now three days since the ill-fated charge, and Adrian was still in a comatose state.

He had a great many minor and major wounds, and his mana had been severely depleted without showing signs of regeneration.

If they did not make haste to find a place of healing for Adrian, he could be in serious trouble.

Unfortunately, the escape for their lives had just begun. The Orcs were persistent in their pursuit, and the traps the mercenaries had managed to lay had only halted them for so long. After an entire week on the run, some of the troops decided they had no choice but to face the oncoming horde.

During their desperate trek, Arwen Kirgayen had proved her worth many times over. She had strode into battle on behalf of the remaining command staff, all who were low on morale after the loss of their fortress and their Count. The Silver Foxes had supported her.

She had done all she could to save countless people from dying at the hands of the Orcs. The mercenaries fared well under her command, and if the time was right, they temporarily enforced a position from which to repel their pursuers.

Still, despite the running defense she and the Silver Foxes conducted so well, everyone's steps became hard and slow. In the frigidity of deep winter, the escapees soon tired.

If the Rangers had not returned from the south, their morale would have withered away completely. As it was, the Rangers bore the news that the northern lords were setting up a defensive line to meet the monstrous horde. They pressed on, then, and finally reached the first line of defense.

Hope soon flared up, for the men of Balahard reckoned that once they reached the rear, they could reorganize and fight once more from the front lines. Surely, by combining their numbers with the other northern soldiers, they could crush the Orcs who had decimated Winter Castle.

At least, that was what they had hoped.

Their hopes were soon proven to be nothing more than optimistic illusions.

They had reached the northern lords' final defensive line, forty kilometers into the lands of Shutrol.

And as they saw these lines, their anger flared up.

"Is this the collective might of five noble houses?" Vincent cried out in frustration.

A few months ago, Vincent Balahard had informed all these lords of the seriousness of the situation.

He had requested their aid. Even as Winter Castle fell, he had sent word out before him, telling these lords to ready themselves for the Orcish host.

The lands that they had arrived in were clearly not prepared for the war to come. The scant few barriers were of shoddy workmanship, and the trenches shallow. The soldiers were poorly armed and armored. Even if these nobles' banners fluttered oh-so-proudly, they had no regulars that constituted their main forces. The soldiers stared at the men of Balahard with the same fearful expressions as the base peasantry.

Those troops gathered under the banner of Count Shurtol were more disciplined and better armed. However, their numbers were insufficient to field an effective defense

against the Orcs.

“Your Majesty!”

As the survivors neared the final line, nobles rushed from the keep. They frettingly affirmed Maximilian’s well-being and thanked God again and again that he had survived.

They also gave words of consolation to Count Vincent of Balahard. Not one of them inquired as to the condition of the First Prince.

“My brother is in a critical condition,” Maximilian told the nobles as he asked them for aid. Only then did they ask about Adrian’s well-being, their faces falling into masks of sadness. It was clear that none of them were truly concerned. Maximilian had seen the brief flaring of hate that had been written so clearly upon their visages.

They all seemed to believe Balahard had fallen due to the presence of the young man.

In their small minds, they reckoned that Balahard had been perfectly fine until Adrian had arrived, so he must have been the cause for the current calamity.

Strong emotions flared up in Maximilian, then.

His brother had gone to Winter Castle and fought alongside its soldiers. His brother had planned their retreat, and even then, he had charged into certain death. Truly, it seemed that Adrian’s mindset was one of a man who knew that death was inevitable and that the only worthy labor in life was the construction of a fine coffin.

It must be a terrifying existence to see life along such lines.

Even then, his brother had done what needed to be done. He had prepared their retreat, ambush spots, and numerous other plans without the knowledge of almost anyone. Due to Adrian’s foresight, so many troops had been able to survive and reach safety.

The First Prince had achieved so much, yet these nobles hated him as if he was a bearer of plague and pestilence.

Ehrim Kiringer swiftly acted as he grasped Maximilian by the arm, preventing the prince from assaulting the gaggle of nobles that had so fawned at him. Ehrim shook

his head, and Maximilian calmed himself. Now was not the time to be driven by emotion. The priority was to bring everyone together and plan a cohesive defense.

That would be no easy task.

The troops sent by the five noble houses numbered 3,200. That was no small number, yet the adage of quality over quantity came into play. There were four-hundred elite warriors under the banner of Shurtol. The remainder of the force were all conscripts who had received the bare minimum of training. There were only twenty knights, and they served as the personal guard of their respective lords.

The future seemed grim and dark.

Maximilian knew that these conscripts would do more screaming than fighting once the Orcs came upon their lines.

“We are currently recruiting mercenaries with all our available funds. Please, Your Majesty, grant us some time,” Count Shurtol said when he got the chance. His promise of more troops was a comfort, at least.

Unlike the other northern nobles, who still did not seem to have come to their senses despite the proximity of war, Bert Shurtol was a mindful man. He had spared no effort in welcoming the survivors and providing them with some much-needed succor.

Unfortunately, time was the greatest enemy.

The news came that the Orcs had been sighted in the northernmost tip of the province.

The startled lords hurriedly divided their troops and set out in all directions, eager for battle.

Maximilian also tried to muster troops and march out. He conferred with the other surviving commanders.

“There are too many wounded soldiers for us to march out now. We must first reorganize, as swiftly as we can, and then we shall finish this war,” Ehrim Kiringer stated as he faced off with the Second Prince. Maximilian had tried to sway the knight many times, yet Ehrim had cut him down with a curt dismissal every time.

Count Vincent Balahard also expressed his intention to hold the position and reorganize his battered forces.

“These feckless nobles are just trying to use us. Should our soldiers, who have barely survived, die so soon for them?”

So it came to be that the Orcs engaged only with the allied nobles on the northern border.

After the meeting was over, Ehrim calmly explained why the Second Prince was so very frustrated.

“Alas, we cannot stop the Orcs in our current state. Even if it does harm to the north, these nobles must be made to understand how dire the situation truly is,” the knight added. Maximilian could not refute the logic of this argument. He knew that some sacrifices needed to be made for the greater good. Even the young prince could see that the northern lords had not yet fully shook awake.

Nevertheless, Maximilian so stubbornly wished to march because he had personally experienced how terrible and persistent the Orcs were. If such ferocious beasts were allowed to spread through the kingdom, it would be worse than a disaster.

It would be a calamity on the greatest of scales.

“By the way, Sir Ehrim,” Maximilian sighed as he spoke to the knight.

“Yes, Your Masjesty?”

“Whose doctrine were you preaching during the meeting?”

Ehrim gave a hearty laugh.

“Don’t you already know the answer, Your Majesty?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Is there anything else you wish to ask me?”

“Not for now, thank you Sir Ehrim.”

“When do you think your brother will wake up?”

Feeling uncertain about the inevitable sacrifices that would occur, Maximilian knew that the only answers he sought could come from his unconscious brother.

* * *

After having deserted their clumsy defensive lines, the troops of the northern lords had scattered. Only the soldiers of Count Shurtol remained a cohesive force, for they had a castle to fall back to. The survivors of Balahard, as well as the Silver Foxes, now prepared for battle once more as they tended to their wounded and strengthened the ramshackle defenses of Shurtol Keep.

During this time, a messenger came from the capital. He bore word that the royal family and the central nobles were planning to send additional reinforcements. Maximilian could never forget how Vincent Balahard looked upon receiving this news. He had closed his eyes, and the anger that had contorted his face made him look like a vengeful demon.

Since that day, few words were spoken, and the atmosphere within Shurtol Keep had become one of foreboding silence. So intense was the mood that the soldiers of Count Shurtol could rest little, wracked by fear and anxiety as they were.

Maximilian could only sigh as he observed this state of affairs.

Due to the laxity in response from the capital, the northern nobility had not grasped the gravity of the situation. Too many valuable and talented people had died because of this.

A Count had lost his life, and knights who did not fear death had also died like flies. So too, Rangers and infantrymen had become naught but rotting carcasses on the snowy fields.

The sacrifice and dedication of centuries had come to nothing. The efforts of so many generations had been thrown into the abyss.

How much had the kingdom lost, and how much would it continue to suffer?

Whenever Maximilian tried to think upon such things, his mind became pained in protest.

“The Orcs have annihilated the forces of Count Ghurn!”

News of the defeat of northern lords streamed in from every quarter. These were not just defeats, no, they were cullings that had left few alive. Five of the six provinces that bordered Balahard had become naught but empty sagebrush fields littered with the dead.

The damage was increasing exponentially day by bloody day.

The news came that the central army had established a second defensive line, bordering the Rhinethes river, which ran across the central kingdom’s northern area. Reports also came in that the promised reinforcements had diverted their course to fortify the lines along the river.

“His Majesty the King strongly encourages His Majesty the Second Prince and His Excellency, Count Balhard, to fall back to the second defensive line along the Rhinethes.”

Count Shurtol contemplated the words of this latest messenger. The implication was clear: The kingdom was to abandon the seven large northern provinces and the many smaller counties north of the Rhinethes.

“It is a tactically sound course of action, as we will be compressing our lines and concentrating our power all along the banks of the Rhinetese. The problem is that the men of the north are, rightly, proud and far too stubborn to abandon their lands,” Ehrim stated, giving his honest appraisal.

“I… I should have sent my men to Winter Castle when the First Prince had asked me to,” Count Shurtol sputtered out.

Maximilian closed his eyes into a tight frown.

Regret had come too late into these halls, and these nobles were suffering the consequences of their complacency. The northern nobles now clustered around the survivors of Winter Castle, hoping that they would defend them.

It was a despicably selfish display and a shallow masterpiece of their conniving cowardice in so many ways. “When Balahard had asked for aid, who responded to our call?” Vincent berated the lords once more, his voice bitter. Having tired of the cold voice of Count Balahard, the nobles clustered around Maximilian in their

churlish quest for succor.

“Your Majesty! Because of our ignorance on matters, we have made a great mistake! If… if you but give me a chance, I will contribute all I have to the stability of the north, to the renovation of our lands. Please, please lead us, we who have committed such stupid errors!”

So the nobles begged him, some even falling to their knees, their hands clasped before them like the lowliest of beggars. Maximilian was filled with conflicting emotions as he saw them prone upon the ground, praying for deliverance. They looked pathetic, weeping over blunders that they could easily have avoided.

“You disgusting whelps,” Maximilian spat out.

“W-well, Your Majesty?”

“You feckless excuses of noble men. You useless lumps of lard with not a grain of sense in your minds, and not an ounce of pride in your hearts! You beg before me, you custard-sipping teat-suckling pigs?”

The nobles were struck dumb, into a state of utter stupefaction as they heard these curses flow from a prince who had always been renowned for being a polite and gentle soul.

‘Clap. Clap. Clap.’

Maximilian heard this slow applause and all heads turned towards its source.

“Hah, you did a good job for once, brother.”

Everyone stared at the young man who had entered the hall, supported by a woman who looked like a maid. Vincent and Maximilian immediately straightened their backs, as one does in the presence of a respectable figure.

“Your Majesty!” Vincent cried out in joy.

The First Prince waved his hand at them, and then fixed his gaze on the cowering nobles.

A great fire raged deep within his sunken eyes.

“Well, I see all the guys I have been so eager to meet are gathered here,” he said with a feral grin, his gaze boring into the pathetic, prostrated figures.

CHAPTER 69
I FINALLY GOT USED TO THE WORLD (2)

I had been awake these past two weeks, yet asleep.

I knew that I lived, yet at the same time, I felt dead.

All I could do was listen to the trundling wheels of the wagon that I was certain carried my prone body.

Now and then, I heard urgent and even desperate screams and orders ringing out in the cold winter air. I held onto my shattered Mana Heart, constantly testing its energies. That last moment upon the battlefield, borne upon a Lancer's mount, replayed itself endlessly within my mind.

I saw my uncle, surrounded by Orcs, as he took a last stand to save his castle. I saw the people who had willingly sacrificed themselves so that others could escape. My heart throbbed at the throbbing pain of all these memories, yet I welcomed my torment this time.

It was my punishment for letting so many die, all so I could live. Even though I wished to be king, I had allowed my uncle to suffer the defeat that should by all rights have been mine to suffer.

We all wish to transcend, to become something greater, yet few of us are prepared to pay the true price that this ascension demands. My plans had been no different than those of an indolent optimist. My resolve had been like that of a child.

Simply put, I had been far too arrogant.

Drunk with the glories of my past, I had seen everything as beneath me. I had looked upon even death as a trivial and fickle thing. None of the deaths of other beings were mine. And now… Now it was as if death had beaten us to the road of transcendence, its absolute and uncaring nature barring us from a greater tomorrow. All my words, all my actions were no different than those of a spoiled little princeling who considered existence to be naught but a game — an idle curiosity. I was a foolish,

arrogant, and blind being. And being such, I had lost a great many people who had been dear to my heart.

I then opened my eyes.

The realization finally struck me.

At that moment, new flaming spirals engraved themselves upon my heart.

The pounding never ceased.

And then… a message popped into my head.

『A new dance poem… 』

『A new characteristic… 』

I did not listen; I did not focus. I could not.

All I knew was that from this moment on, I had to concentrate on things other than the creation of good verses, mere poems.

My destiny lay in a greater pursuit.

* * *

“Your Majesty!”

It was certainly a pleasure to see the First Prince awake and upon his feet. Still, no one dared to approach him and voice their joy at his good fortune of being alive. The moment that everyone looked into his cold blue eyes, silence descended upon the hall. Someone even audibly gulped. The tension in the room was stretching ever tauter as each second passed.

The First Prince started walking jerkily. Although it was more of a desperate stagger, he continued to move forward under the sheer force of his will. There were lords before him who clearly did not understand the basic principles of language, for they had rolled their eyes at him as if he was some leper who had strayed into a meeting of its betters.

The nobles exchanged glances with one another then, and Count Hestein was the first to stand.

“Well! Your Majesty… I am glad that you seem okay.”

As the Count spoke, Adrian stumbled and acted as if he was about to fall over. Count Hestein acted under instinct, reaching out to support the crippled prince. The Count got pushed back, and the sound of iron scraping upon leather was heard. The Count’s eyes widened, for the sword of the Hestein family was no longer sheathed at his waist.

No, it was now in the hands of the First Prince.

A sucking sound echoed through the hall, and a dark red liquid flowed down the blade. The Count grasped onto the prince; his fingers pale with tension.

“Your… Your Majesty, what… are… you…” The Count spoke not another word as his voice became a guttural gurgle. He slammed his hands over his throat, and blood flowed through his fingers.

His eyes rolled back into their sockets, and he crashed to the ground.

“Count Hestein!”

“Count!”

A furor broke out in the hall as the gathered nobles realized what had become of the now-late Count Hestein.

“Your Majesty!” The shocked younger Balahards shouted.

“Brother!”

Maximilian hurried forward and interposed himself before the First Prince, grabbing his shoulders. Adrian struggled to escape the hold, his sword swinging wildly, his intent clear: He wished to move on to the next noble.

“Get out of here!” Maximilian shouted into his brother’s face. His voice was filled with sorrow and frustration. His hands were stretched out before him as he spoke once more.

“I am angered as well, just the same as you are, brother!”

The First Prince did not answer; he merely shrugged off his brother’s arms and took a step back.

“But this is not how we should sate our anger! Now is the time for us all to come together and fight the Orcs!”

Maximilian once more jumped in front of Adrian, who had tried to sidestep him.

“Join together?” Adrian spat out, his lips twisting into a maddened grin.

“This is really not funny,” he added, his voice as twisted as his smile.

“Brother, no!” Maximilian exclaimed with mounting urgency.

“Vincent… How many messengers have we sent, dear Vincent?” Adrian asked.

“I have sent a man every three days, for three months. That would be roughly thirty heralds that have left our walls,” Count Balahard replied with a cold voice.

Adrian met his brother’s eyes once more. Maximilian looked down in shame, not having known this fact. At that moment, some of the cowering nobles erupted in desperate placations.

“Now, Y-Your Majesty! P-Please calm down! We… We also had our own circumstances to contend with.”

“Your Majesty, the First Prince. No matter how guilty we might be, you cannot do this! This is not right. This is not the law!”

While some had desperately begged, others strongly protested the oh-so-recent death of Count Hestein.

“In a similar situation, I had rejected a direct order to not march north. I saw no justifiable reason for such a foolish and reckless order. These men, these curs, they deserve nothing less than a summary disposition of justice,” Ehrim Kiringer stated as he stepped forward, his voice ringing out in an abstract judicial tone.

“The royal family itself pretended not to grasp the severity of our plight. By rights

they, even in their absence, should face this summary disposition, for they had breached their sacred oath to their vassals."

This argument would have been seen as treason under any other circumstance, yet Sir Ehrim was a persuasive speaker, and his words rang true. The lords soon realized the severity of their plight and knew that they could not win anyone over to their cause. Still, some tried.

"I am sorry, my lords, but how could we truly know the plight of Winter Castle?"

"Yes! We have the right to defend ourselves. If we are guilty, we deserve a trial!"

As he heard their urgent pleas, Adrian pushed his brother aside. He had just gotten up from his sickbed, and his motions still showed that he lacked his normal strength.

"The spirit of Winter Castle has not been broken," Adrian stated. He would endure what had to be endured until he could no more. "Even if Winter Castle has been abandoned, the spirit of its defenders lives on!"

Upon hearing this, Maximilian had no choice but to retreat before the wrath of his brother.

"Come here," Adrian beckoned to Ehrim, who came to his side, for he had expected the order.

"The Count of Shurtol. Barons Eaton, Cardane and Barnheim."

These lords looked at one another after Ehrim called out their names.

"These four men, please step back behind the line of knights. Only you have aided us, even in the smallest of ways."

They hesitated at first, and then followed the knight's command.

"Today, there are sixteen nobles before me, yet I see only four humans," the First Prince declared, his tone of voice as glacial as the deepest of winters.

It was only now that the remaining nobles realized that judgment had been passed upon them without a word in their defense. They looked around the room like frightened hares, a wall of knights hemming them in from all sides. Then, the

knightly guards of the nobles drew their swords, intent upon spilling royal blood. Not an ounce of loyalty was to be found within their hearts.

The rotten heart of the kingdom finally unfolded in front of everyone's eyes, the deep corruption that had claimed the minds and hearts of the nobility.

Maximilian felt dizzy in the face of such a brutal truth. A sickening sound filled the hall then, and everyone turned towards its source. The knights who had guarded the traitorous nobles were stumbling to the ground and spitting blood. Greenish shadows darted between these dying men. The visceral smell of blood clashed with the smell of freshly shorn grass in Maximilian's nostrils.

The elven executioners had joined in the proceedings of the court. In an instant, these elves wiped the blood of knights from their blades and lined themselves up behind the First Prince. Then, the Wire Knights stepped forward and forced the nobles to their knees.

"Your Majesty! Please, please forgive me!"

"If you forgive me but this once, I shall be loyal to you for all eternity!"

The lords begged and begged as Adrian slowly made his way toward them.

"You had your chance!"

Every time the First Prince swung his sword, a lord lost his life.

One baron, demanding a trial to the very end, had his chest torn open in a welter of gore.

One Count, begging as he prostrated himself, soon became a headless corpse that slumped to the floor. A self-made man had managed to flee but a few paces before he was stabbed multiple times through his back.

Some nobles even managed to draw their blades, intent on taking Adrian as a hostage. Others only drew their swords at the last moment. The First Prince was relentless in his slaughter and cut them down without hesitation. As he struggled to catch his breath, he stared at the remaining nobles. They saw him blinking his blue, bloody eyes, and they trembled before his gaze. And then, just like that, they too died screaming as they wallowed in their own feces and piss.

Adrian sank to the floor, his energy finally exhausted, his legs no longer able to support him.

“Oh… Oh Your Majesty! Oh… Please… Please, please, spare me!”

Only one noble remained. He was Count Gullon, a man who had so boasted of his closeness to Montpellier. He begged like a squealing pig, with tears and snot flowing down his face.

The First Prince slammed his arms to the floor and started to crawl toward the Count.

“My Majesty… Oh… Your… Please! Just this once, just me!”

The First Prince climbed onto the prone noble as he tried to retreat with his hands and feet, like a scuttling crab. Adrain then slowly pushed his blade into Count Gullon’s open mouth. As the blade slid deeper down, the Count grabbed onto his neck as he gurgled and groaned. He died kicking and wriggling in the manner of a filthy maggot.

Adrian released his grip upon the blade and took deep gulps of air. The blue light that had been burning all across his body subsided. An expression now came onto his withered features. His exhaustion had at last taken over. However, a sliver of life yet remained upon his features. A woman approached him then and supported him as he collapsed onto a chair with great difficulty.

Every eye in the hall was turned upon him.

Some of the faces wore expressions of regret; others were filled with fear as they considered their future.

The men from Balahard mostly evinced the former emotion, while Maximilian and the men from the capital predominately expressed the latter. Adrian did not care about how he was viewed.

“Antoine.”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Make sure your men spread the rumor. These nobles decided to go their own way.

They had fled from our walls during the night."

Adrian did not mince his words. It was apparent – First Prince had changed.

The captain of the Silver Foxes merely bowed and left the hall.

"Ehrim Kiringer. Gather your men and take over each and every castle that these lords held. Do you need a justification?"

"Would it be enough if we say that Your Majesty looks poorly upon men who had died while fleeing in dishonor, and that, by your grace, you have chosen to send men to protect their holdings and their relatives?"

"Good enough. Now hurry."

Ehrim made his departure as he led the Wire Knights. The First Prince continued to dish out orders. The knights and soldiers of Winter Castle left the hall with life-or-death expressions upon their faces. Those who received their orders did not dare protest. They simply followed them to the letter.

Even the young Count Balahard had jumped up like a young lieutenant when he was curtly instructed to give his appraisal of the current military situation.

Count Shurtol had beheld all of this with abject terror.

As he observed the blood-encrusted First Prince bark out his orders, a new feeling came into the heart of Count Bert Shurtol. The deaths of his fellow nobles had been gruesome indeed, yet he felt no disgust towards His Majesty for passing such a judgment.

Still, Bert could not even dare to breathe loudly, much less make eye contact with anyone.

So sudden and total was the change in the First Prince's demeanor that many people felt grim and terrified in the face of it.

"The Count of Shurtol."

"Yes! Yes, Your Majesty!" He replied almost immediately.

“The kingdom has abandoned the north.”

Count Shurtol’s expression hardened as he recalled the pressing issue he had forgotten of since the massacre. The royal family’s decision to set up their defensive lines south of the river meant that they had virtually abandoned the sixteen provinces and holdings of the north. Just as the northern lords had turned their backs on Winter Castle, so did the royal family discard the north.

Only a terrible future now remained for the northern realms, a future of hordes of monsters streaming through a pass that was no longer controlled by Winter Castle.

“I do not intend on abandoning the north to the ravages of beasts,” the First Prince continued as he stared at Count Shurtol. Adrian’s head was bowed, and his expression terrible to behold. “I will remain with the Third Legion. I will start over here, in this keep.”

This form of speech did not suit a prince in a kingdom still ruled by his father.

No, the proclamations that flowed from Adrian’s mind were those of a king in his own right.

CHAPTER 70
WHAT YOU LOST, WHAT YOU FORGOT (1)

To declare a fresh start would sound quite the pleasant prospect under normal circumstances.

However, such pleasure could only be felt if the north was not facing such a dire situation.

If the Orcs were not dealt with, the nobility would have no time to normalize and tend to their holdings. The monster horde would trample over them all by then. Whatever the perils of the future, the prime directive at that moment was to drive out the Orcs. Fortunately, the First Prince had already conceived a countermeasure.

“We don’t fight these Orcs.”

This solution was radically different than any that the lords had thought up.

They blinked dumbly upon hearing Adrian’s words. The First Prince had clearly stated that he would not abandon the north, and now he said that he would not fight the monsters that had invaded it?

They could not comprehend his intentions. How does one drive the Orcs away without fighting?

“The Orcs do not employ a logistical system of baggage trains that operates outside of their forces. Their procurement of food is simple: They battle and win, then fill their stomachs with the flesh of their foes. That is their way, and it has always been this way.”

So Adrian began to explain his viewpoint to the befuddled lords.

“So, in other words, if there is no battle, and no one to kill, they must either starve, retreat, or eat one another.”

Those who understood the true implication of the prince’s words groaned. Among

them was Baron Cardane, a man known for his strategic mind.

“Do you plan to create a tomb of green fields, Your Majesty?”

Adrian nodded at the Baron’s question. Count Shurtol had been unable to follow the conversation up to this point. “I feel quite stupid, yet I cannot grasp the will of His Majesty. What is meant by not fighting, and what are these… these green field tombs?” He asked hesitantly.

“His Majesty plans to starve the Orcs to death. That is how we can attain victory without unsheathing our blades or using up our arrows,” Baron Cardane explained on behalf of Adrian.

“These are called Cheongya tactics (淸野戰術), a policy of scorched earth where everything the enemy needs to survive is destroyed or removed.”

It was an extreme military strategy where all possibilities of locally procuring resources are denied to the enemy by ravaging one’s own lands or stealing everything away before the enemy had even entered an area.

“It is indeed an obscure doctrine and very difficult to implement. Even if this strategy succeeds, it will have an immense impact on the northern economy for years, if not decades.”

So it was that that the maximum amount of material was gathered to the rear of the lines. That which could not be safely carried was destroyed on the spot. Most of the goods destroyed were food, including fields of grain that could no longer be harvested. Whether the scorched earth policy was successful or not, famine was sure to follow after the war.

Baron Cardane had pointed out his concerns about a starving populace.

“Orcs are very picky eaters,” Adrian responded without hesitation. Except for a few special cases, most monsters were carnivores. They could only sate their hunger through hunting and plundering, their only fare being meat dripping with blood. They had no interest in grain stored in barns. So, the crops did not have to be burned or the grain stores destroyed.

These sacrifices would not be for naught, yet many lords were ashamed that they were forced to give up the castles and lands that their families had kept for

generations. Still, none of them dared voice this aloud. The blood of the slaughtered nobles still encrusted the floor of the hall. No one dared go against the First Prince's commands, for they had seen the extent of his wrath. And to confound the matter, there were men of Winter Castle in the halls, men who had only lost their castle after much bloodshed. To confide such thoughts in front of them would be pitiable indeed.

The lords now fully understood their situation. They had committed sins that they could not deny, yet their help was still needed. Still, they could not properly grasp the situation. They just wanted to lay low and survive this harshest of seasons. They kept their silence, yet the meeting went on around them.

"The Orcs aren't weakened enough to just retreat once they are denied their food source," Vincent objected. Even if the scorched-earth tactics weakened the Orcs, it would make them angrier than ever before, for there are few things as dangerous as a hungry beast.

The commanders of Balahard were all now speaking at once.

"After all, we can't avoid battle, whether it is now or later, they will come to us."

Adrian nodded at Vincent's words.

"You are correct. If you want to drive out the Orcs, you have to eventually face them."

A short while ago, the prince had said he would not fight. Now everyone could guess even less at his true intentions.

"We will not be fighting the monsters," Adrian said. "That duty will not fall into our hands."

"Surely, Your…"

"No, it is the troops south of the Rhinethes that will face these Orcs."

It was only then when the prince's intentions were made clear. The commanders groaned.

"They should face a real winter, at least this once," Adrian continued, his gaze fixed upon the gathered lords all the while. "Let us never forget the harshness we have faced."

Since they had committed veritable crimes, these lords had no excuse, even if their punishment was harsh. They lowered their heads in shame. Adrian now looked toward the men of Balahard.

“How foolish they were, and how much they lost in their folly.”

The men who left the hall all wore different expressions. Some looked aggrieved and wracked by self-doubt, while others evinced emotions of relief and anticipation. Maximilian admired the scene as he studied the complex disparity in expressions. It was a rare sight to see.

A boy who had yet to reach adulthood had gotten wounded in battle, falling comatose. This boy had just woken up and was already unilaterally leading the other men. And it wasn’t just that he led the proceedings; no, he controlled every aspect of the northern realms. At his words, the cockier nobles were humbled, and the anger that blazed in the eyes of knights became righteous purity.

“We will need troops to lure them to the river.”

Many voices rose, then, defeated men who wished to regain a semblance of honor.

“I shall goad them into following me!”

“No, I will lure them!”

There no longer was the sorrow of defeat upon the faces of these men. Even without the huge tree that had upheld the north, Bale Balahard, these men were lively. They looked like young warriors who had returned to their hearths and homes just before the onset of winter.

It was a marvelous sight. This sixteen-year-old boy was filling the boots of an old man—a man who had guarded the north for over a half-century.

Who could have imagined it?

What would the nobles of the capital say if they saw this sight?

It wasn’t difficult to guess at the answer. Not so long ago, the central nobles would have stated that these northern lords were competent, these men who now bowed before a boy. They viewed him with mixtures of fear and expectation. Someone

clapped their hands, and this sound shook Maximilian from his reverie.

“The meeting ends here.”

Just like that, it was all over. Maximilian felt ready to collapse.

He gave little input in the daily meetings that followed. While the northern men’s strategies deepened and expanded day by day, the Second Prince couldn’t even decide whether he belonged here or with his father. Maximilian felt like he was tugging at a knot that could not be loosed. Still, he knew that Adrian could easily untie this philosophical knot for him. The Second Prince breathed out his pent-up frustration. It felt as if everything had become perfectly normal once more.

* * *

When the northern lords left the hall, only a few knights remained. Vincent and Maximilian were there as well. Many different emotions emerged upon the faces of those gathered.

“Your Majesty.”

They had uttered his title, yet could not bring themselves to ask their questions.

“If you call to me, do not hesitate. Say what is on your mind,” Adrian instructed all those around him. Despite his exhaustion, his tone and expression were different than usual. Still, Vincent and a few others did not note this change. His eyes, normally boring into someone else’s as if their eyes were a gateway to their souls, now wandered back and forth. He felt as if he did not know who to look at and who to turn to.

“If no one has anything to say, I shall leave. I cannot waste any more of my time,” the First Prince continued. Nothing in his voice or on his expression suggested that this young man had massacred so many nobles. The leader who had overpowered men through his sheer force of will no longer existed. In his place sat a youth who was determined to make the strategies of the northern realms work.

“Your Majesty,” Vincent called out once more. “How many men in the Balahard line have chosen to die in their beds?”

Upon the mention of death, panic came to Adrian’s face.

“I need to rest. My body has not yet recovered.”

“Only five are known of in records,” Vincent pressed on, taking a step forward. “It is not unusual for a Balahard to end his life on the field of battle. No, it rather honorable for us to die in such a fashion.”

Upon hearing this, Adrian surged from his seat.

“He did not die from a regular Orc, he died while battling their king! He summoned flames around him so that his allies could escape!”

The prince almost staggered to the ground, and Adelia rushed to support him hastily.

“Huh… It seems that my father’s end was not worthy enough to elicit your sympathy,” Vincent spat out with force. “Do not insult his memory.”

The First Prince did not deign to answer, and Vincent said no more. Instead, he left the hall with his head hanging in shame. The others followed suit.

“I’m glad you woke up safely,” Adelia said as she ran her hand over his hair, yet she still looked at him with pity in her eyes.

* * *

During the night, a great number of soldiers were sent from the keep. The northern lords, including Count Shurtol, led their troops to garrison key areas. Hundreds of riders scattered in every direction bearing messages. While their destinations differed, their orders were all the same. They had to ensure the evacuation of the fearful citizenry.

It was not difficult to convince the people to leave their homes, for the rumors that the Orcs were planning to conquer all the world had spread far and wide by now. The refugees headed south, carrying only their bare necessities. The troops of the northern lords escorted them. The Orcs attacked some of these fleeing groups, yet on the whole, not many had faced attack.

It was because those who had survived Winter Castle had scattered over the land, luring the Orcs away so that the populace had time to evacuate. The refugees and troops heading south split from one another, for the soldiers headed to the keep in the east. The civilians kept on going toward to bridge that spanned the Rhinethes.

The Second Prince was tasked to lead them.

It was by order of the First Prince, who feared that the refugees would be denied a crossing by the central army if there was no one to vouch for them. All the way, Maximilian had feared an attack by the Orcs and the terrible carnage that would entail.

Thankfully, no such event occurred. The Second Prince completed his mission as the large host of refugees smoothly reached the Rhinethes Bridge. Maximilian was greatly relieved as he saw the kingdom's troops on the other side of the river. Flags with the heraldry of various families fluttered all along the banks. At a glance, it seemed that the force was about 10,000 strong.

Some of these soldiers streamed out of their garrison, blocking the bridge.

"Cease this folly!"

Maximilian had come to the fore, flipping the hood of his fur cape from his head as he saw the soldiers barring the refugees from going further.

"These people have escaped the turmoil in the north. Clear a path for us."

"Well… Your Majesty?" The commander of these men had recognized the prince, and he could not hide his shock. After this meeting, everything happened in a flash. The men might have been nervous upon seeing the great mass of refugees, yet they could not bar their passage.

Whether this was on his father's command or due to his own presence, Maximilian did not know.

All he could say with certainty was that the people would be safe. They would be well protected, fed, and clothed, as the land was prosperous and the defenses tight. There was a great contrast here, for the other parts of the kingdom lacked resources. Their citizens were poor. For these refugees, entering the central kingdom was like entering a new world.

"Hail the Second Prince! Hail the savior of the northern people!"

Maximilian's face flushed red as he received praise from nobles and soldiers who did not know the truth of things. Under other circumstances, he would have stopped the

undeserved praise they heaped on him and explained to them the actual state of affairs. It was not the time for truth, though.

Now was the time for playing roles and acting the hero.

A seat had already been readied to celebrate his return from the north. The camp atmosphere was so hot and jovial that it did not fit the winter season at all.

“A large army of Orcs are heading toward the river,” Maximilian stated from the get-go, pouring icy water over the celebratory spirit of all.

“Well, I thought the northmen would have defeated the Orcs by now,” a noble loudly mused.

“You presume too much. The Orcs shall be here in a week, or two weeks at most!”

The sweet music that the bards were playing ground to an abrupt halt. Smiles vanished from the mouths of nobles, most of them having lifted their glasses in a merry toast.

“This party is over, and done with,” the Second Prince said.

The tone of his voice was gentle and warm, like the sunlight upon a maiden’s skin during midsummer.

In contrast, the emotions that flowed through his words contained a harshness within them, a harshness akin to the severe wind that blew over the mountains and through the valleys on cold winter nights.

CHAPTER 71
WHAT YOU LOST, WHAT YOU FORGOT (2)

“I am reassured, for we have Sir Alloy.”

“Yes, I heard you had achieved a great deal of late. Congratulations.”

The nobles and knights were complimenting one another with golden praise.

“The parade ceremony of the Rose Throne Heavy Infantry of your family is quite spectacular, am I correct?”

“Yes, and aren’t your county’s Iron Hawk archers some of the most elite marksmen in the kingdom?”

The nobles laughed as they raised their glasses. Maximilian brought his hand to his face upon seeing them speak so idly. It was difficult to determine whether this was a war room where commanders gathered or a banquet hall for the nobility.

The prince studied the faces of the gathered nobles, recognizing a few of them. There was a middle-aged man with a scar across his cheek; he was a well-known knight. A young man with broad shoulders was a promising soldier who had recently gained fame through his actions. All these men had reputations and noble postings, and all they did here was to boast about their abilities and the quality of the troops they commanded.

Somehow, this farce was called a war council.

It was radically different from the council in which the northern lords had died screeching under Adrian’s blade. At that meeting, there had at least been strategic discussions, though far less nutritious snacks. There wasn’t even a sentence of strategy or tactics to be heard among all these nobles.

“Wouldn’t this be the ideal time to plan our countermeasures against the orcs?” Maximilian asked all the lords who were strolling through the flower garden, discussing varieties of orchids, and so forth.

“Before Your Highness’s arrival, the competent commanders had stayed up entire nights to create our defenses, and the wise nobles and knights have already inspected their work to fix their shortcomings.”

The commander’s answer, spoken as to appease a child, did not impress Maximilian in the slightest. No, the prince already knew how lax the defenses were, even if the commander said that late nights were spent fixing them.

The strategy took advantage of the geographical features of the Rhinethes, focusing on creating a line of fire over the bridge and funneling the orcs onto it. Against a conventional enemy, it was a sound plan, yet it exhibited a single glaring error. The orcs, and especially their stronger units, did not fear death.

Maximilian recalled the words his brother had spoken to him when he had arrived at Winter Castle: ‘If they charge over a plain, they shall die in their hordes just to taste your flesh. If they face walls, they will throw themselves against them, taking your fortress by climbing over the heaped corpses of their comrades.’

Maximilian did not believe him at first, thinking his brother just wanted to scare him. It was no joke; after the first battle, Adrian’s words had been proved many times over. Even now, Maximilian didn’t know how he had survived. He considered their current situation. Winter Castle had had high walls and competent rangers. Here there were neither walls nor the rangers of Balahard.

These nobles and elite commanders who boasted so much would piss their breeches the moment they came face to face with orcs. They would, despite their strong bodies, see themselves torn limb from limb as their consciousness faded into oblivion.

Their battle lines would break in an instant, and tasting their fear; the Orcs would become even more savage and bloodthirsty. Hell would unfold its bloody wings in front of these men’s eyes. Maximilian could even now imagine the sundered lines of defense and the ruined, desolate cities. He could see the people chased by orcs like rabbits and the tattered banners of the kingdom flying over nothing but empty fields and skeletons.

The Second Prince decided then and there that he had to prevent such carnage.

That was why he had led the refugees. Once more, his brother’s request came to his

mind:

'Don't let the line falter. The barren and harsh mountains of the north have made these beasts fierce indeed. If they gain entry to the warm and bountiful south, their rampaging hordes shall wreak irreversible carnage.'

Maximilian looked about himself, listening to the nobles speaking.

"Twenty-two noble families are gathered, and this amounts to a force of 9,723 soldiers. Four-hundred of these are prominent knights, thirty-three of which are the best in the kingdom."

"Yes, we have a wide range of forces, and the enemy has to strike in narrow formations. We have an overwhelming geographical advantage. Funneling them over the bridge means that, in theory, we double the effectiveness of our soldiers, so even if 20,000 and not 10,000 orcs storm our lines, we shall easily prevail."

All these men were speaking as if they already had the victory well within their hands. Both the nobles and commanders believed this. The soldiers themselves were even sad that not all of them would show off their prowess, and the knights were blinded by vanity. The commanders greatly underestimated the enemy and were overconfident in their abilities.

No one considered the true face of the coming disaster; all they saw were the flowers sprouting behind them as they gained a victory. They all seemed to forget that Winter Castle had collapsed and that the northern kingdom had become naught but empty fields of death.

I can do this, Maximilian told himself. He cleared his mind as he touched the scars the orcs had inflicted upon him.

"I propose that we reconsider our deployment of the troops, and review their readiness for facing the monster horde," Maximilian said energetically. The expression of all those gathered hardened. Maximilian smiled gently, as not to offend these men but rather win them to his side.

"It is an effective layout devised by renowned commanders and knights. Arguably, no better strategy than this one exists." Maximilian chuckled under his breath, for these men had no idea how poor these fine arrangements that they had made were. Even if the noble families had brought their elite troops by royal decree, all these troops, as

well as the knights, have been placed in the rear. It reflected the aristocrats' selfishness, who only worried that their special troops would come to harm. The troops that would face the first wave of orcs were from small families, and most of them have been branded as conscripts. Maximilian had not been taken seriously. He studied the room once more.

"My soldiers' inspection ceremony has been excellent, Your Highness," said one of the great lords of the realm.

"Yes, did you say that they were the Gassian Heavy Armored Infantry? Your soldiers are so brave. With them at the front line, the morale of our allied forces is sure to increase significantly," said Maximilian.

The Highlord looked at the commanders with a confused face, seeming to ask them to mediate the prince's statement that his soldiers were to join the rabble at the front.

"And Sir Alloy, I have been told that you achieved great deeds of late. Congratulations! With your famous sword among them, I am sure the soldiers in the advanced ranks shall not be shaken," Maximilian quickly said, the cynicism almost dripping from his face. He almost resembled his brother then, though he was unconscious of this fact.

"Your Highness, His Majesty, the king, has not ordered Sir Alloy to fight on the front lines!"

"Indeed, there is already an order of battle as arranged by the competent command staff. And besides, as drunk as I am now, wouldn't it be foolish of me to go prance around like a private greedy for glory?"

Some of the nobles that Maximilian had pointed out were made fun of by veterans. A few knights were overflowing with mana resonance, so they quite liked the prince's proposals. The nobles themselves, afraid of losing the investments that were their elite troops, expressed their reasons as to why they and their men could not stand on the front lines.

"Your Highness's witty advice surely deserves attention, but, unfortunately, it cannot be followed. As Your Highness has said, the enemy is almost up to our nostrils already, so if we reposition our forces now, we will only cause needless confusion,"

the overall commander said, wishing to put a stop to the prince.

“Had the enemy been up to your nostrils, as you say, would all of you be sipping wine and admiring flowers? To me, it seems that there is plenty of time to enact my suggested changes.”

The nobles looked at one another with embarrassed faces. Some of them knew Maximilian, and a few had only spoken to the prince on occasion. These were even more embarrassed. They had known the Second Prince as a gentle and dignified man, always kind and polite to everyone, even if he was widely acclaimed as the Second Coming of the Founding King, Gruhorn Leonberger. He had never been an imperious personage who never showed his displeasure at the nobles, or even mock them as he had just done.

“Your Highness, this is a military camp, and we all respect the dignity of the military structure and hierarchy, as is right. Just as we respect Your Highness’s dignity in turn,” the commander said gently, obviously trying to defuse the tense atmosphere. “We are glad that you are here.” Maximilian understood the message but pressed on nonetheless.

“Well, I once more propose that our best forces and the knights of the high lords are placed at the very front, and that they be supported by everything we can throw or fire at the orcs.”

“Your Highness-“

“This is an official proposal that I make to all gathered here. I do this not in my capacity as the Second Prince, but as commander of the Northern Reinforcement Legions, as appointed by His Majesty the King.”

Maximilian, now having confirmed his authority in the command structure without any doubt, once more proposed the troops’ redeployment. This time the nobles and commanders could not ignore his words, so they had no choice but to review his plan.

Maximilian sighed his relief, for the meeting finally felt like the military council that it should have been. He still maintained his cold exterior, however.

* * *

Maximilian had sat through several days of meetings by now. He had quietly stimulated or questioned the pride of the high lords as was needed. He wanted them to no longer disgrace themselves by keeping away from the fighting. Even those nobles who had vehemently tried to keep their forces in reserve were forced to obey his commands in the end. The prince was not fully satisfied, for he now focused on the lower lords, pointing out those who did not wish to cooperate. If the high lords had acceded to his will, so too should these lesser nobles.

Once the meetings were over, the order of the defensive lines was completely reversed.

All the elite troops in the rear had been placed on the front lines, while the smaller noble families' weaker forces took up the rear.

"I am humbled by the initiative and the modesty shown by the nobles toward my suggestions. The royal family will never forget your righteous actions."

Maximilian gently smiled as he said this, though the nobles trembled under his gaze,

They had been exhausted by the Second Prince's demands, feeling that they had been obliged to follow them, risking to lose his courtesy had they rejected him. Even though they trembled under his gaze, they still evinced a new level of admiration toward Maximilian.

The political guile of the Second Prince had paid off, for he had played upon the nobles' fear of disgrace, a thing they feared almost as much as death. He had stimulated their fears until all their resistance to his plans flowed away like dust in the wind. They no longer saw him as a fifteen-year-old boy but rather a ruler in his own right.

The nobles exchanged glances and reached an unspoken agreement: The next king was among them; they were convinced of this. The succession was still a long way away, and their present concern was to prove their prestige and might by repulsing the army of orcs headed their way. They were motivated now, believing it to be a good political move if they were responsible for the victory.

Their resolve did not last long.

"The orcs are coming! The orcs are coming!"

The moment they saw the vast horde of orcs flocking to the bridge, the ambition that had been burning in the hearts of the nobles was so quickly extinguished. There were so many orcs, these nobles thought, and they were so big. Weren't these monsters supposed to be a trivial threat?

The nobles swallowed, their throats dry with fear. These monsters were twice as big as fully armored heavy infantrymen.

"The orcs are chasing someone!" an archer with keen eyes shouted.

The nobles all stared with amazed faces, for as the archer has said, people were indeed fleeing before the army of monsters. One wore a helmet and iron armor, but with the distinct lines of a slender woman's figure. A man in white ran next to her, followed by three ghostlike cavalrymen who followed with fluttering capes.

"Aaaah! Loose your arrows, fire, fire!" a noble, who had recognized one of the men, shouted with wide eyes.

"Who is over there?" inquired the other nobles.

"That man is the eldest son of Count Eli!"

CHAPTER 72
WHAT YOU LOST, WHAT YOU FORGOT (3)

“Fire!”

Bernardo Eli was riding hard for the bridge.

The nobles turned toward the archery commander, who shook his head.

“They are outside our range, my lords.”

The nobles clucked their tongues upon hearing this. The weary horses and their riders were about to be overrun by the orcs.

Bernardo’s shouting showed that he was aware of his peril.

“The Eli family has a relationship with my own Bradenburg line. Although it’s not a deep relationship, it is enough to spare a few arrows,” Count Brandenburg said. He then beckoned a couple of his Iron Hawks from their position atop the hill. They came and took up places before the heavy infantry. Their tunics had black hawks embroidered upon them, and their longbows stood almost two meters tall.

“There are the iron hawks!” shouted someone who recognized the Brandenburg’s sharpshooters, who now lined up facing the river.

“The goal is to slow the enemy! Focus on their advanced ranks!”

The archers strung their bows and leaned back to find the perfect angle.

“Fire!”

The sound of two-hundred arrows hurtling into the sky resounded over the river banks.

The orcs who had been fiercely running were hit, crashing to the ground. Those behind them jumped over their fallen kin. Another volley was loosed, and more orcs

fell, the others now stumbling over their corpses. As the charge of the orcs was halted, Bernardo and his party thundered onto the bridge. Still, they did not slow down, and infantrymen and nobles alike scattered before their horses. The nobles angrily pointed their fingers at the riders, who ignored them. Eli rode straight to the command tent on the nearby hill where so many flags fluttered.

“I am Bernardo of House Eli, and I came here with news from the north!” he shouted at the knights guarding the tent as he vaulted from his horse. “What news from the north?” the nobles demanded as he entered the tent.

“Many of the lords had led troops south and had encountered orcs. They were all annihilated, along with their men.” The nobles groaned collectively upon hearing this.

They had heard rumors among the refugees that the lords, including Count Ghern, had fled like cowards from Shurtol Keep, dying as they fled. To hear that these men had marched south sounded far better than them having failed to flee from the orcs.

“Currently, the four families of Shurtol, Eaton, Cardane, and Barheim have taken in refugees and are at war with the orcs.” Bernardo gave these nobles no time to think about the northern lords’ disgraceful deaths – he moved to more current reports.

He told the nobles where defeats had taken place and how many soldiers had died.

He told them what noble families had been killed outright and what castles had fallen. He did not have a grain of good news.

“Huh, this isn’t even the worse of it!” he stated, and the nobles groaned once more.

When they had encamped here, they had thought that the northern lords would at least hold back the orcs to some extent. Their families had, after all, been in many wars against monsters. However, it was now a month after the news of Winter Castle’s fall had reached them, as well as the news that the orcs had ravaged twelve of the sixteen provinces and counties. All the great northern lords had died, and only four nobles in total remained.

The central nobles now felt a sense of crisis that they had not even felt when the great host of refugees had crossed the bridge. It was the first time that they realized how easily death could claim them.

The last great wars the kingdom had fought were against the empire. They had lost one of these wars one-hundred-and-twenty years ago, then winning the next war about twenty years later. And in not one of those wars had so many nobles died.

Except in very rare cases, nobles had been taken prisoner only to be released for ransom. It was the tacit and well-established practice of respecting the sanctity of life of another nation's aristocracy. Such customs seemed useless before the orcish tide. For monsters that did not even speak human languages, the rules by which humans conducted themselves held no value. These dead northern lords, so many of them, clearly showed this. Their bodies hadn't even been found, so completely had they been consumed by the orcs.

The nobles were all sweating as they considered the horror of this.

They had been sleeping on the most comfortable of golden beds, yet now it felt as if they had been thrust upon the hard ground of a thorny field.

While they blankly considered their doom, Bernardo exchanged meaningful glances with Maximilian. Bernardo nodded, and the Second Prince shook his head.

Maximilian knew that Adrian's knights must have struggled to lure the orcs here and that Bernardo had told a great many lies. The nobles had died under the First Prince's wrath instead of under the orcish horde's hunger.

Many had died in the north, but the details of their deaths had been fabricated, and Bernardo relayed this fabrication. The other lie was that the surviving four lords did not plan to war against the orcs; no, they were waiting for an opportunity to flee south. Maximilian now ran with the lies, as had been planned all along.

"My lords, as you have heard, the orcs are cruel and show no mercy. Their brutish nature has been bred into them over so many countless centuries," Maximilian said, taking on a tone of grief.

"If our lines are broken, the central part of the kingdom will face the same bloody fate as the north."

Realization flowed from the faces of one noble to another.

"The orcs have fallen back!" came the cry of an officer outside the tent.

The nobles now headed to the front, their faces having hardened like stone upon hearing Bernardo's reports. Dozens of orcs lay dead on the bridge. Their corpses looked like big, green hedgehogs with all the arrows that stuck from them. The troubling thing to consider was how far they had come under that hail of arrows. Most of them had died halfway across the bridge. However, the larger ones had nearly succeeded in crossing the bridge and reaching the lines of infantry. The nobles were shocked.

The renowned Iron Hawk archers had shot at these orcs from afar, and when the monsters had come into range, the other archers had fired at them as well. The archers accounted for about ten percent of the total defending force, and these orcs had come so far despite constant volleys.

The nobles turned their attention to the opposite banks of the river.

Countless orcs were upon the plain, just outside of a longbow's range. The soldiers were agitated, seeing so many beasts that wanted to tear them apart and feast upon their flesh.

A wind blew in from the river, and the nobles trembled as the chill penetrated their thick furs.

"It will be a long night tonight," a common soldier said.

The nobles unintentionally nodded their heads at the man's words.

* * *

The soldier had been right, for the night was indeed long.

It stretched out for those that guarded the river banks. It stretched out for the nobles who lay sleepless in their luxurious tents.

Even if all were awake, they were still suffering a nightmare.

"More of them came during the night."

At dawn, more Orcs were to be seen across the river.

"They seem to be 10,000; having doubled from yesterday," a soldier stated in an

idiotic tone of voice.

“They are more than we expected, but not that much more. Maybe the fact that their bodies are so big makes it seem that there are more of them that there are in truth.”

The nobles were silent after the commander’s words. They could all see that there were more orcs and that they were very large in size.

When Maximilian looked at the orcs, he could not help but shudder. The nobles on the command hill felt fear. The soldiers on the front lines were even more afraid. The nobles had boasted of their heavy armored infantry, but these men now seemed very nervous as they clutched their shields. A few spearmen kept nervously glancing behind themselves.

“Calm your minds! There aren’t that many of them who can cross at one once!”

“Our Knights of the Red Iron Chain will stand before you, so take heart!”

It was only the knights, men whose minds were as sharp as their blades, veterans of war, who remained calm. They only numbered four-hundred in total.

The nobles had thought that so many knights could easily deal with a few orcs. The nobles now understood how small a force these were.

An old knight had come to the front lines, not saying a word. He had been observing the sheeplike nobles and soldiers for some time.

He was Count Richter Lichstein, the greatest swordsman in the kingdom. He had even been classed as a better swordsman than Bale Balahard.

Richter drew his sword. It shone with a brilliant light, the aura so great that it banished the last vestiges of night, heralding in the brightest of dawns. The overwhelming magical presence of this gifted lion of a knight spread in all directions.

The soldiers trembled, all of them feeling as if they had been woken from a nightmare.

Count Richter re-absorbed the magical light and sheathed his sword. He then quietly stepped back, having given everyone his message. He had calmed the restless hearts of soldiers.

However, this display of his prowess had not only excited humans.

The orcs began to breathe loudly in anticipation. Among them, an unusually large orc suddenly bellowed out a roar. The orcs were now all lining up in ranks, and a few of them took elongated shields from their backs that looked very cute in their hands.

The nobles gasped as they saw these shields, for familiar crests were engraved upon them.

“That is the heraldry of House Ghurun, a snow deer!”

“And there is the coat of arms of the Winterwolf family!”

The orcs now held many emblems and treasures of northern families. More than ten noble houses had their symbols displayed in the crude hands of the monsters. It was a visual expression of the utter destruction that the north had undergone.

Once more, the large orc roared, and the others rattled their looted shields.

“They are coming!” one of the officers screamed, and he was right.

The orcs surged forward, the earth quaking under the tread of their feet and the roars that came from their maws. The archers fired as soon as they had range.

Orcs had the shields raised above their heads as they charged on like enraged bulls. Only a scant number of them fell under the hail of arrows. One more volley fell among them, and this time a few more died, yet the great majority still charged at the bridge.

Their vanguard reached it soon enough.

“The Iron Hawks should fire again, kill more of them!” The longbowmen fired once more at this command, targeting the vital spots of orcs under the shields. The orcs that had gained the bridge fell in short order. Still, there were too many orcs, and the only archers who could target and penetrate their tough muscles were the Iron Hawks.

Even so, just because one fired their arrow into a vital spot of the orc did not mean he would die. Many of them had survived multiple such hits. Their toughness was comparable to the orcs that had chased Bernardo.

“They are Orc Warriors!” the Second Prince shouted, identifying their nature.

The Orc Warriors that had survived and had crossed the bridge now charged at the ranks of men.

“Rose Thorn Infantry!”

“Hah!”

The heavily armored infantrymen pressed their shoulders against their shields and braced their legs for an impact.

“Hold! Hold!”

“Hah!”

The soldiers with long spears waited for the moment when they would thrust forward and halt the Orc Warrior’s charge.

That moment never came. The orcs sprinted the last few meters and banged into the shield wall, charging clean through the hedged formation of long spears. Men were crushed by their shields, and their cries of pain ran against the river banks.

Orc Warriors slit the throats of the fallen or wrung their necks until their spines broke.

The long spearmen had been battered back, with many of those who survived thrown onto their asses.

CHAPTER 73
HALF AND HALF (1)

“Stab at them!” someone screamed, yet in the tumult, it was uncertain who had shouted. It was certainly not one of the Rose Thorn officers. The spearmen faltered, and the heavily armored infantry screamed in terror as they were pushed back into the spears of their allies. The Orc Warriors once more tore into the shield wall, and the front line collapsed under their onslaught.

“Knights, to the fore! Hold them!” Maximilian commanded in a clear tone over the shouts of terror. Knights entered the fray then, their brilliantly shining swords cutting through the Orc Warriors. The knights pushed the orcs back, forming a new front line before the shattered infantry.

“You damned bitch!” Bernardo Eli spat out as he severed the head of an Orc Warrior.

“Let’s leave the front line in the hands of the knights and reorganize our rear!” Arwen Kiryagen exclaimed, an Orc Warrior struggling as her blade pierced its chest. She twisted her sword, and the orc retched blood as it died.

“Finish off the fallen orcs!”

The soldiers sprang into action at this command and started stabbing their spears into orcs who lay wounded on the ground. Arwen met Maximilian’s gaze.

The knights had been able to reform the front lines, yet Orc Warriors had still managed to bear through and reach the camp’s center. They had attacked the rearguard in short order, and the soldiers on the front could not adequately aid the knights, having to deal with the foes behind them first.

No matter how skilled the knights were, if an ax split open their head or if a spear pierced their lungs, they died as any human would. It was paramount to secure the rear as soon as possible so that the heavy infantry could properly defend the knights’ backs.

Arwen was slashing away with her sword, focusing on the lower portions of the orcs.

If an Orc Warrior had its legs cut off, the infantry could more easily deal with it. She spun about and severed legs wherever she could. Bernardo followed her and did as she did.

Orcs with severed legs were roaring in pain but were soon silenced as soldiers ended them by spear and sword. Bernardo swore as the fish-like smell of blood pierced his nostrils.

“The smell of blood, piss, and dead orcs!” Bernardo taunted. A hatchet flew at his head, and it would have struck him had Arwen not intercepted it with her sword.

“Watch your head, Eli!”

“Thanks!” Bernardo shouted as he launched himself into a roll and severed another Orc Warrior’s leg.

“No need to thank me, just watch your head!”

Bernardo shouted something incomprehensible as he dodged a javelin, the Orc Warrior that had thrown it falling to Arwen’s blade.

“What did you say?” she asked him, wiping blood from her face.

“Nothing,” Bernardo said as he gripped his sword, his face shrewdly set. He continued to hack and slash at the legs of orcs.

“Really, they only make us suffer,” he grumpily complained. “This damned wicked King of the Orcs, and these damned princes!”

A bright blue sword almost swatted his cheek.

“Be careful what you spew from your mouth,” Arwen warned him. He shut his mouth when he met her cold gaze.

“Oh, you look terrible when you are thinking!” Arwen scolded Bernardo, for his face looked like that of a little boy with heartache.

“Fuck this!” Bernardo cursed. At that very moment, the person responsible for Bernardo Eli’s exile, the person who had criticized him for his lack of virtue, was resting in a ruined fortress.

* * *

Someone struck me on my shoulder.

“Well, then?” I asked the woman who dared to strike at a prince. She wore a forest green cloak, and she was one of the Mistletoe elves who had made it possible for me and the knights to retreat from the orcs on the field outside Winter Castle.

“What is your name?” I asked her, and she answered in the elves’ sign language, indicating that she was called Gunn.

“What do you have to report?”

She extended her hand into many complex patterns as she gave me her report. It took all my attention to interpret the hard-to-understand elven sign language, yet I could not be angered at her use of such a form of communication.

No, this elf could not speak because Sigrun had cut out her tongue. Sigrun had left her as a messenger here, to act in the interest of the Elder High Elves. Unfortunately for this poor elf woman, her master was twisted to such a level that my subordinates trembled in fear at the thought of her sadistic personality.

Sigrun, the maniac elf, had cut out the tongues of her servants, fearing that they would learn my poems before she had heard them.

It was the tragic confluence of her obsessions, of her monomaniacal desires, and, in my opinion, her evil. Thanks to this, the swords-elf had become a pitiful being who suffered daily.

‘South, Enemy, Hell Warrior, To Battle?’

Barely having interpreted her sign language, I frowned at the elf. Gunn’s hands moved frantically once more.

‘Behind, Orc.’

I started to understand, my mind grasping at her intended meaning. She raised her hands and waved them a couple of times, expressing ‘War’.

I nodded. Gunn now brought her hands together as if in prayer and bowed her head.

I knew this meant ‘Lord’ or ‘King’. She combined the gestures.

‘War, Lord.’

I understood then, for she talked about the being that was ever on my mind. The message was clear: The Warlord who had shattered Winter Castle had reached the defensive lines upon the Rhinethes.

“Everyone, pack up and ready yourselves to march!” I ordered the nearby officers and knights.

The expressions of the rangers and knights, who had been feasting, changed in an instant. Their eyes asked the unspoken question, and I nodded at them. A strong blue light came to the knights’ eyes, and the keen eyes of rangers perked up. They started to tell one another what they would do once the Warlord had fallen.

“If I catch the bastard, I will cut him into thousands of pieces and scatter his meat over the snows of the north.”

“Let’s stuff his head and put it over the gates of Winter Castle.”

“His eyeballs are mine. I shall cut them from him while he still lives,” Quéon Lichtheim added. I was very aware that these knights cared little whether they lived or died after they had been defeated and driven from their home.

They all looked to me to lead them into victory, and I would give my all to grant them that much. These soldiers had lost their Count, a Quad-chain knight, a man who had lived a brilliant life.

The Count had held well against the Warlord’s battle fervor, yet he had still been defeated. I knew that his sacrifice had not been in vain. I had expected to face the Warlord and kill him. It was a fair and noble plan, and it was formed from the mindset that had ruled me ever since I had gained this new life.

But I had been fooled, for I was not a human, I was not a new man, a new sword. My essence was still every bit that of the ancient sword that I had always been.

My purpose was not to fight and conquer; no, my purpose was to slay the enemy.

I would not enter the battle to claim a great victory for the kingdom. I shall face the

Warlord and rob him of his life, for this was my function, my fate.

Hides are tanned into leather, and leather is folded and stitched until it becomes armor.

Bones are sharpened and crafted into swords.

I shall take what the earth gives me, using its bountiful loot to achieve my purpose.

Simply put, I was on the hunt, and I now knew exactly where my prey was.

“Revenge for Count Balahard!”

“We fight to restore the north, to reclaim Winter Castle!”

“Death to the orcs!”

The knights were flush with mana and almost mad in their wrathful fighting spirit.

The long wait was done with, now both the hunters and their game were ready.

All that remained was to claim the prey’s head.

“We march!”

The men of the north cheered and roared at my words.

* * *

Maximilian was frowning as he heard the reports.

“The casualties inflicted over the past weeks are enough to destroy an entire legion. Six-hundred-and-twenty-three soldiers have been killed, and more than double that number have been wounded.”

“We need to bring in more troops. It is the only way that we can hold the line.”

Men who had been so confident that they could beat back the orcs were now panicked, shouting out the need for reinforcements.

An almost surreal feeling came to Maximilian, then. He felt sorry for the dead as if a large stone had replaced his heart. At the same time, though, a frantic excitement raced through his mind.

“We need to send messengers to the royal palace to request additional troops from the Central Army. We need to summon the central noble families that had not yet deigned to participate in this war!”

This desperate need for reinforcement was the same plight that Winter Castle had faced, abandoned by all. Fear and despair spread through the ranks of the defenders like wildfire.

The soldiers of Winter Castle had less than half the forces that now held the river. With these numbers, they had been able to fight for several weeks against an army of orcs that were more than double the amount that now beset the opposite banks of the Rhinethes.

“The fatigue of the knights has reached critical levels. They need to rest, to be cycled out by regular infantry.”

The Winter Knights and the Black Lancers had also rested for a day, Maximilian thought, and on that day, the fortress had almost fallen. The knights had fought on after that, the tormenting pain of mana depletion tearing at their stomachs.

“The morale of our soldiers is at an all-time low. No one is keen to hold the front lines.”

The faces of the rangers came to Maximilian’s mind, then. The faces of men who stood in the freezing wind, determined. These were the faces of men who never left the wall, men who sacrificed themselves to hold the castle at any cost.

Wasn’t it reasonable to ask the same of the central soldiers? Should they not sacrifice themselves to save the lives of so many innocents?

It had been only a week now, seven days of hard fighting. Nevertheless, these craven unbelievers acted as if the end was nigh.

“If we had but aided Winter Castle at that time…”

The lord could not finish his sentence, and so great was his guilt that he covered his

face in shame. The other nobles stared at him. They were disgusted by the mere mention of Winter Castle, for it reminded them of an irreversible blunder that had caused irreparable carnage. It was a disaster that they had a hand in causing. They held a stigma at its mention, a stigma that was stamped into the foreheads of fools.

Mentioning Winter Castle was to remind them of an ugly truth that they had chosen to ignore. The disaster that now faced the central region had its cause not only in the form of the Warlord but also in these arrogant aristocrats' human errors.

Maximilian did not know what he could do about it, for he knew the true disaster was yet to come.

"For these past two days, and this morning as well, a strange energy has been detected from across the river," Count Richter Lichstein informed the lords. It was the first time that he had spoken during these councils.

"What type of unusual energy would this be?"

"It is at least on the level of four Mana rings, perhaps even more. It is a powerful presence," Count Lichstein added, staring at the pale-faced nobles. He held his silence then, staring at Maximilian, asking an unspoken question.

The Second Prince exhaled heavily.

"It must be the Warlord. It seems that the King of the Orcs has finally arrived," Maximilian said with a heavy voice. "He is the beast that has defeated Bale Balahard."

Those words brought a chill to the council's atmosphere.

Warlord. A name that these men had heard before, a disaster that they had not taken seriously. It was now heading towards them.

"Well, I'm sure Count Lichstein can deal with this beastie," one of the nobles said with a nervous chuckle.

"I never faced Count Balahard, but he was never weaker than me. We were equals," Richter spat out then, shattering the vain hopes of the nobles. Richter Lichstein knew that if the former Count Balahard could not best the Warlord, then neither could he.

"I must seek support from the king right away," the overall commander said. The

request for reinforcement had already been sent, so the nobles knew what the commander meant by 'support'. The commander talked about one gifted person in particular who would be needed if Count Lichtheim could not prevail, though the commander did not dare name this person. The nobles said nothing; they all knew what this request portended.

They also suspected that this gifted master might still not arrive in time if they summoned him from the capital. The disaster was right under their noses, yet the hope of preventing it was far from their reach. A monster named silence had engulfed the command tent, for no one dared to speak.

"I have a way," Maximilian said, piercing that monster's belly. "If the Warlord comes to our lines, Count Lichstein will deal with him."

Considering that this monster had slain bale Balahard, what Maximilian said sounded like a death sentence.

"If Your Highness commands it," the Count's answer came, his tone mysterious. Maximilian could not tell if the old knight was confident that he would not die, whether his loyalty to the royal family would make him face certain death or whether he welcomed an honorable death regardless. But Maximilian had other plans.

"I am not saying that you should battle the beast to the death, Count Lichstein."

Maximilian had never intended that Richter do something beyond his abilities.

"You just have to hold it off for some time."

The Count's eyes lit up at this.

"It sounds like a bid to buy time. I assume you have another measure for dealing with the beast?"

"There is something, yes," Maximilian said with a nod.

"May I ask what this plan is?" the commander interjected scornfully.

"There are people in the north who will deal with the Warlord," came Maximilian's neutral reply. Upon hearing this, a few of the nobles erupted in cheers, yet their joy

ended when another question came to the fore, a question that quickly smothered the atmosphere of excitement.

“If there exists such people, why haven’ they killed this King of the Orcs already?”

Everyone knew that this was a very valid concern. Maximilian was thrown deep into his thoughts upon hearing the question. He recalled a conversation with his brother.

‘It’s too dangerous, Adrian! Haven’t you risked enough already?’

‘From the start, I had to fight for myself, yet I pretended to remain unaltered by my inner turmoils. Such folly only led me to bloody my nose.’

Maximilian asked about the meaning of words that made no sense to him, and his brother answered.

‘I was unable to kill the thing then. Now, I can do it.’

Maximilian could not tell the nobles the truth; it would make things very difficult. He thought for some time before replying.

“It was not possible then. Now, though, a sword has been honed that can decapitate the Warlord.”

He could not tell them all, not these nobles whose blind opinions regarding the First Prince would make any truth turn to falsehood in their hearts. It was better to dissemble now and let the truth sort itself out later.

“Are there any hermit knights capable of facing this monster in the north?” came the question, and Maximilian was relieved, for these nobles had crafted his response for him.

“Indeed, indeed,” said Maximilian, knowing that it was a hermit that hid his true face from the world.

Because if my brother is anything, he is undoubtedly a hermit.

CHAPTER 74
HALF AND HALF (2)

Contrary to Maximilian's expectations, the Warlord did not join in the battle.

He did nothing; he was just there. Yet, his mere presence changed things radically.

The orcs had been courageous and fierce before, but not fearless monsters. After their king had arrived, they became beasts that knew no fear or pain.

They became berserkers.

They cared not if they lost limbs or were pierced by dozens of arrows. They fought on until they died. Even before this change, the soldiers could barely stem their tide.

Now, facing such unbridled rage, the soldiers died in their droves, unable to mount a defense. The heavy infantry of the high lords was wiped out to a man. The long-spearmen were annihilated next. Knights entered the fray and tried to hold the line, yet their efforts were in vain. Four-hundred exhausted knights could not hope to stop the two-thousand orcs who had already crossed the bridge. The soldiers supporting the knights were locked in their terror. The nobles could not effectively command their troops due to the Warlord's overbearing presence on the other side of the Rhinethes.

Even the inspiring presence of the Second Prince, who led from the front, was not enough to ease the terror in the hearts of men. The formations collapsed before the orcs, and the casualties mounted as the monsters continued their assault.

A few brave commanders were trying to organize a retreat, yet the orcs targeted them. The moment that the commanders tried to rally their troops, the orcs focused on them, and fear silenced the tongues of these officers.

The command structure had disintegrated, and each unit fought on its own. It was an embarrassing state of affairs: Soldiers being abandoned in the middle of their army.

No one had time to consider the absurdity of it, least of all the soldiers who were

dying in their droves in the center of the tumult. It was only a matter of time until all the lines were broken.

The champion of the kingdom joined the battle then, and the powerful energies that Count Lichstein wielded brought a semblance of calm to the terror-stricken soldiers. However, sanity was not enough to turn the tide of the slaughter. The champion was forced to battle ceaselessly instead of bolstering the troops' already broken morale.

The forces in the center of the fight suffered far more during this single day than they had in the previous ten days combined. Heavy infantry and spearmen continued to be eradicated. The archers who had joined in the battle also suffered considerable losses.

Yet, the most painful losses occurred among the knights. On that single day, a whopping one-hundred-and-forty-two knights had died.

They had suffered these losses after attempting to push back the orcs without support from the soldiers.

"We can't deal with them in the open like this, we need to retreat to a fortress!"

"We have to concede the battle and retreat!"

Not so long ago, these nobles had stated their defensive setup was like a heavenly fortress that could withstand double the number of orcs they now faced. These nobles now all cried out in terror.

"If you retreat, the central kingdom will suffer like the north! Where can you retreat to?"

"Tai Lien Fortress is nearby, surely if we reach its walls we can defeat them!"

"What stupidity! How do you know they will head there, and not scatter throughout the kingdom?"

"Then you want us all to die here? I shall rather risk dishonor and withdraw, it allows us to come up with better strategies!"

Maximilian had his head in his hands as he faced the cowardice of the nobles. He had thought that they could endure the onslaught, at least for a few days after the

Warlord would make his arrival.

His supposition had been unveiled as nothing but an illusion.

The soldiers were terrified merely by the presence of the Warlord across the banks. The Second Prince had tried to bolster the soldiers' spirit until his throat had become raw under the effort. It had all been for naught. Only now did Maximilian appreciate how brave and hardy the soldiers of Winter Castle truly were. He also knew that he lacked his brother's ability to bring hope and fire into the hearts of fearful men. Maximilian knew that if Adrian had been here, the lines would not have broken within an instant. A sense of futility coursed through Maximilian's entire body, yet he knew now was not the time to blame himself.

He knew that if things went on like this, defeat was assured in but a day.

If the kingdom's champion, Count Richter Lichstein, had not joined the battle, then the battle would already have been lost.

"I will stand with the knights to the end," Richter had said. It was a reassuring statement yet had done nothing to ease Maximilian's anxiety. When besieging Winter Castle, the Warlord had roared several times and made a great show of its terrible battle fervor. Here, however, the Warlord was completely silent. It had barely shown itself.

The Second Prince could not understand this and felt that it boded ill.

If Count Lichstein had felt the Warlord's presence, then surely Maximilian should have felt it as well. Maybe he was looking at the situation from the wrong perspective. Did the Warlord view the central army as a cold soup to be gulped down quickly or a boiling hot soup that would peel the skin from the roof of its mouth?

Regardless, Maximilian knew he had to prevent the monster from enjoying its meal in the first place. If the kingdom did not stand strong here, the entire war would become a brutal affair of constant attrition. Even so, not even the presence of Count Lichstein had been able to bolster the troops and maintain the lines. Maximilian mulled over it all yet could not think of a solution. A day passed without him gaining any answers. Upon the next day, just before dawn, the orcs launched a violent assault, which was repulsed by the gifted knights who held the front lines. Two more days passed, the knights barely holding the front but enduring nonetheless. The fifth

morning dawned brightly. The orcish horde was still across the river banks, and the human army was still tattered and exhausted.

The only difference upon this day was the strange silence that had fallen over the great army of orcs.

“What now? Why are they so quiet?”

“You think they are resting?”

The knights were speaking in hushed and weak voices. At that very moment, a command erupted over the lines:

“Cover your ears!”

Then, a terrible bestial roar of pure malignance broke across the Rhinethes.

* * *

The Orc Warrior sagged to the ground, gurgling as blood spilled past its fingers that clutched its throat. The orc stared dumbly at his draining lifeblood, then raised his head, staring at a man who regarded him balefully, his sword at the ready.

The Orc Warrior thrust his arm out, his grip still strong enough to crush a human’s neck. He could not grab his foe, failing to get a grip. The man sliced out and once more slashed the orc’s neck. The Orc Warrior shuddered and fell face-first into the snow.

The man cleaned the blood from his blade.

He looked at the surviving orcs. They did not number much, and they were rapidly being thinned out. Finally, the death screams of the orcs were heard no more.

“We have dealt with all the orcs inside the castle, my lord.”

“Only inside?”

“The outlying regions are being scoured.”

The man, Vincent Balahard, scanned his surroundings after the officer had given his

report. Soldiers and knights were covered in blood, and the determination in their eyes pleased Vincent. He climbed the stairs to the castle's walls. When he gained the wall, a knight handed him a pole that bore a furled banner.

Without a word, Vincent installed the pole into a groove in the wall. The cloth banner unfurled then and started to flutter in the wind. Upon the blue cloth was a pattern of three intersecting shields.

It was the Triple Shield, the symbol of the House Balahard.

Vincent stared at the banner for a while and then turned his gaze to those who stood beneath the walls. The blood-drenched knights and soldiers looked up at him with expectant faces.

"You brave boys of Balahard!" Vincent shouted, meeting each man's gaze in turn. "We are finally back were we belong!" His declaration came out as a great roar as it echoed against the walls.

"We have struggled to gain what is ours!"

Those gathered below answered him with almost bestial cries of triumph.

"The shield that stands against the wind is eternal!" Vincent cried, raising his arms to the mountains. "Winter is ended, and conquered evermore!"

'Oooh hoo! Oooh hoo! Oooh hoo!' came the chanting of knights and soldiers alike.

Some of them had tears flowing down their faces, others smiled brightly at one another, and a few even kissed the ground and the walls of Winter Castle. They kissed the hard stone of their home. Others had their eyes tightly shut, taking in the gravity of the moment.

Even if they expressed it in different ways, all of them shared a single emotion: Joy.

They felt elated and excited at having regained the fortress that had so cruelly been taken from them. The other remaining lords of the north looked as the soldiers of Balahard cheered on. How great had the grief of these men been, after losing that which their ancestors had held for centuries? And how great was their joy after having reclaimed their heritage!

The nobles did not dare share in the cries of victory. They softly congratulated the victors, and even this did not come easy to these guilt-ridden men.

Winter Castle itself was not a pretty sight.

There remained traces of the previous battle around and within those walls. The frigid land had frozen corpses scattered across it. A severed arm, not eaten by the orcs, still clutched its sword. A frozen ranger's vacant eyes were staring into the void. The walls were covered in frozen blood. It was hard to estimate how long the brutal siege had dragged on and how much blood had been spilled.

"Let us go to him," Count Shurtol said firmly. He then led the hesitant lords up the stairs to Count Vincent Balahard.

As they climbed the stairs, a blade-like wind scratched at their faces. They struggled to keep their eyes open and could hear little over the roar of the wind. It was so cold, yet they dared not complain as they looked at the many corpses littered upon the walls.

Pieces of broken armor and the snapped hafts of spears were scattered everywhere. Here and there, a frozen ladder or siege hook remained. The tale of Winter Castle's siege was painted in a grim tableau, the nobles almost hearing the roar of the orcs and the screams of dying men. How could these men stand to live, much less fight, in a place like this?

They had fought here for months on end, through blizzards and constant cold, a cold that these nobles struggled to bear for even a moment. They had fought and died here, waiting and hoping for reinforcements that never came.

"If you had not come up, I would have already headed down," the Count of Winter Castle said as the nobles reached him. He was also looking at the frozen carnage upon his walls.

"Congratulations on the retaking of Winter Castle."

"Congratulations, Count Balahard."

The lords had said this much, reflexively delivering their praise.

"Thank you," was all that Vincent said, and the nobles lowered their heads and said

no more. They knew all too well that they did not deserve to be thanked at all. Count Balahard looked at the nobles with indifference and then once more studied the state of his walls and the lands beyond.

The pure whiteness of the snowfields stretched to the great Blade's Edge Mountains. It was a picturesque landscape, a picturesque landscape crawling with all manner of vicious monstrosities.

For this reason, the winter lords, the Balahards, had built their fortress here instead of in the milder climes of the south. This pass guarded the kingdom, and just because the orcs had once taken the castle did not mean they could be allowed to do so again.

"Give me a chance to rectify my mistakes," Prince Adrian had said. He knew that this was their last chance of saving the kingdom. "Help me, and restore Winter Castle. Defend its walls, for you are Count Balahard."

Besides the restoration of the castle, the other remaining task was to guard against monsters from both directions.

"Do not let even one of these orcs escape back into mountains," the First Prince had instructed. In his own words, Winter Castle had to become the guillotine that decapitated the last remnants of a fleeing orc army.

And Count Vincent Balahard had been appointed as the executioner.

CHAPTER 75
HALF AND HALF (3)

Maximilian closed his eyes as he rotated his ring.

Even if he had prepared for it in advance, he could not escape its full effects as his consciousness began to fade.

He inhaled deeply to calm his frantic heart. When he stopped channeling mana, his blurred vision became clear once more.

A great many orcs were in front of him. The knights and infantry threw javelins at the orcs, and some of the monsters covered their heads while others dropped dead to the ground. Still, things looked bad. The archers had been decimated, and many of the survivors were now sobbing.

The whole scene looked apocalyptic, and this was before the main battle had even started!

'Drooomp!' 'Drooomp!' 'Drooomp!'

Maximilian heard a great drum's beating echoing over the battle.

The orcs were beginning their great march across the river. Many of the infantrymen were still completely confused, many of them so terrified that they were not willing to form a line of spears and swords. Those who stood still instead of rushing to the front now began to turn tail and flee the battle.

'"Soldiers, stand fast! Be focused!" the royal champion, Count Richter Lichstein, shouted at the soldiers as he raised his blazing sword high. And as he shouted, an ethereal, red thunderbolt arced through the sky.

"Hjat!" Richter cried as he cut into the thunderbolt. Red and blue energies clashed in a shower of sparks that exploded in the air. The famous knight rolled out of the way as a spear struck the spot he had occupied moments before.

His face was pale after barely avoiding the attack and seeing the huge spear that had almost cut him in twain.

The wielder of the spear had taken a step back as he wrenched his weapon out of the ground.

It was a dark green giant. It was the Warlord.

The King of the Orcs arrogantly looked down at the champion.

Maximilian groaned as he watched the battle from afar.

Why had the Warlord not pursued the soldiers who retreated from Winter Castle? Why had the Warlord entered the battle upon the Rhinethes so late?

Maximilian now knew the answer to both these questions. There was nothing under the Warlord's left shoulder. His arm had been cleanly severed under the clavicle. The Warlord had needed time to recover from such a great wound.

Even though it had lost an arm, the situation did not seem hopeful at all.

A wounded beast does not immediately show up, yet it will eventually do so.

You can always be certain that an injured leopard will slink from its cave once its hunger becomes too much to bear.

The Warlord had come to feast today, and before him stood a silver lion. In the Warlord's eyes, Richter was not cold soup; no, he was a prime slice of meat. Even a big chunk of meat could be eaten with only one hand.

Maximilian saw that his judgment of the champion had been correct.

Count Richter Lichstein was, without a doubt, the strongest warrior in the central army. The brilliant aura of his blade proved that the reputation of his prowess was not false.

Still, the champion would not be strong enough to hold the Warlord back. Maximilian could see this.

Richter's sword struck at the Warlord, who swiped his spear to casually block the

blow.

Time after time, the weapons of knight and orc clashed, and with every clash, Richter's sword aura became duller as his sword encountered the Warlord's red battle fervor.

Maximilian was exhausted and covered in blood, yet he watched on as the champion and the orc squared off.

How can someone survive a battle against such a monster?

Someone grabbed the prince's shoulder; it was Bernardo Eli, mounted and accompanied by three riders.

"The lines have collapsed. We need to fall back to a defensible spot and plan for the future."

Maximilian strongly opposed such a course of action.

"If ten thousand soldiers cannot hold this single bridge, do you think we'll be able to defeat the monsters anywhere else? Retreat is impossible! We have to hold!"

"The nobles have different plans than Your Highness," Bernardo replied in his thick voice. "Look, they are already pulling back!"

Hearing these words, Maximilian studied the distant hill. All the flags still fluttered, yet half the nobles had already disappeared with their core forces. The other half were frantically moving about, probably planning to retreat at any moment.

"Have you ever seen such cowardly pigs! The bastards have no honor or pride!" Maximilian shouted, his normally mild manner giving way to his vexation. He ground his teeth.

"This is not the time to lose our tempers," Arwen stated calmly, managing to ease the prince's anger. "Now, Your Highness, I have to rally my troops," she added.

"We prepare for retreat, then," said Bernardo.

Maximilian once more burst out in anger.

“We have double the forces than we had at Winter Castle! We cannot run from this again!” he shouted as he gestured at the battlefield.

“The former Count Balahard and my brother had led a small force of knights directly into the center of 14,000 orcs! And now? Now a few brave men stand and fight while cowards flee or just watch on!”

The champion was beaten back by the Warlord’s terrifying spear, rolling to the ground to avoid a vicious jab. Knights were staying back, none of them showing any intention of aiding Count Lichstein as he fought the massive orc.

The old knight gained his feet and readied his sword, yet his continued resistance was futile. Blazing red fervor flowed through the red spear, and as the spear struck Richter’s aura blade, the ethereal sword shattered like broken glass.

The champion vomited blood as he staggered from his foe, yet he managed to raise his sword once more.

The Warlord stepped forward, and Richter was forced to stagger back, out of the spear’s range. Count Lichstein still gripped his blade, but it was plain to see that the old knight had lost his fighting spirit. Having created some distance between himself and the Warlord, Richter looked to see who still fought with him. Many of the infantrymen had not regained their senses under the Warlord’s overbearing presence, some of them swaying uncertainly on their feet.

Once more, Richter readied his blade in a two-handed grip, yet his face showed that he only fought due to his duty as a knight. His lust for war, his fighting spirit, existed no more.

“Why is everyone so cowardly, so helpless?” Maximilian lamented as he took in the grim sight of the faltering lines.

“No, why have I been so incompetent?”

Maximilian had awoken, then, and instead of mounting a horse, he drew his sword and raised it to the sky.

“If we lose this bridge, it will be as if we have lost the kingdom, for it will collapse! We shall never fall back!”

A sharp, whistling noise then sounded over the chaos of battle.

Maximilian found its source to be something that had speeded from the human lines into that of the orcs on the opposite bank.

He enhanced his eyes with mana and saw that it was a specially crafted arrow that had been fired. He turned back to find its source and saw that it had come from the hill where the archers were deployed.

Several archers in black tunics, embroidered with black falcons, were drawing their longbows' strings with steady hands.

They loosed their arrows, and the strange, sharp noise cut over the din of war once more.

It is the screeching of hawks!

It was the unique sound of the whistling arrow, the use of which had given the Iron Hawk Archers their name.

The hawkish screech of the arrows was heard only twice or thrice at first, but then dozens of the missiles filled the air with the piercing sounds of their flight.

"Draw, Iron Hawks! Steady! Steady! Fire!" shouted the commander of these elite archers. Dozens of screeching arrows were loosed from their longbows upon the order, and it sounded as if a great hawk was flying over the battle in search of prey.

So great was the sound that soldiers who were still enchanted by the Warlord's roar snapped awake.

However, so tormented were they by their fear that about half of the infantry that had regained their senses turned tail and fled from the battle. Dust was seen in the spots that they had vacated, yet braver soldiers rushed into the gaps, picking up the spears and shields of their craven comrades.

"Those who will fight with me, step forward and form your ranks!" Maximilian ordered as he channeled his mana.

Soldiers whose squads had been thrown into disarray by the Warlord's great roaring now ran to take up their positions as a new defensive line was formed. At that

moment, Maximilian heard a great thundering of hooves.

One-hundred cavalrymen of a high lord, believed to have escaped, now thundered alongside the bank of the river, rushing past the ranks of soldiers that had become entangled in the chaotic melee.

“Knights of the Red Iron Chain, forward!”

When the knights in red armor gained the bridge, they came to a halt. If they were fated to die, they would die on the bridge instead of in their beds.

“Knights of the Red Iron Chain, divide! One half rides to aid Count Lichstein!”

Upon this order, knights charged at the Warlord.

“Your Highness, we are here!” said the overall commander. Other lords were with him, including Count Brandenburg.

The remaining central army had followed their lords, and they now surrounded Maximilian.

“I thought you had all run from battle,” Maximilian said, and the faces of the lords grew sterner at his words.

“My estate is but two days from here, Your Highness. Where will these orcs go if we don’t stop them?”

It turned out that all the remaining nobles were those whose lands were the closest to the Rhinethes.

Half of the entire army had fled, and the remaining soldiers barely numbered more than a single legion.

The nobles who chose to stay were only half of those who had planted their banners on the command hill.

Still, even if their numbers had been halved, their fighting spirit had increased twofold.

However, the situation had become too grim to overturn with a rise in spirits.

The Knights of the Red Iron chain, who had rushed in to defend the bridge, were already being pushed back. Many of them were trampled to death as the ravening orcs charged over them like rabid bulls. The regular archers and the Iron Hawks continued to fire into the great green mass, but the effect of their missiles was minimal.

The cavalry charge had crashed into and trampled the orcs that had already crossed the bridge. However, the knights had now forced themselves into a narrow space and could no longer maneuver their mounts. Their charge had lost its momentum, and they had come to a forced halt. The orcs now tore into horse and rider alike, pulling many knights from their mounts and to their deaths. The infantry had not been given enough time to reform their ranks.

The fact was clear: It was impossible to hold off the orcs with what remained of the central army.

More and more orcs continued to cross the bridge. Spears glowing with fervor pierced the armored knights, who toppled to the ground, dying in an ever-increasing ocean of blood. In a matter of seconds, ten knights had lost their lives.

The champion and the knights who aided him were struggling against the fury of the Warlord, and soldiers were locked in a chaotic melee after the orcs had smashed into their newly formed lines.

It was a battle that could only have a grim and gory end. Maximilian strode into the chaos, and Arwen followed him without hesitation.

“Hah, Your Highness, you like to fight in the thick of it, just like your brother!” Bernardo hollered over the din of battle and the anguished cries of dying men.

How long can we continue to hold them?

A quick study of the field told Maximilian that he had a thousand or so remaining troops, and this while most of the orcs had not yet even joined the battle. The Warlord was still unharmed.

“Your Highness! The danger is too great, you have to get out of the melee!” the commander urgently cried. Maximilian ignored the man. “Your Highness, you have not listened, so now I must act to keep you safe!”

Two knights approached Maximilian from behind and grabbed him by the arms. He struggled but couldn't escape their strong grips. At the very moment that the knights started to drag the Second Prince away, the sound of a horn washed over the Rhinethes.

'Bawooooo! Bwoo woooo!'

"Fuck, they came early!" shouted Bernardo in a sarcastic fashion, the first to react. Maximilian was next on the uptake.

"Our reinforcements are here!"

The great sound of the war horn sounded once more; it's every note ringing out with a terrifying timbre.

'Bawooooo! Bwoo woooo!'

The sound was getting closer and closer, but soon it was heard no more. Instead, the screams of orcs in peril started to fill the air. The sound of dying orcs had come from afar at first, but soon enough came from the very center of the bridge.

Orcs were falling into the river, and among the greenskins could be seen the blur of green cloaks – the green cloaks of the elven swordsmen who were cutting down the orcs or pushing them off the bridge and into the rushing waters of the Rhinethes.

And then, a young man with a flaming sword appeared, flanked by his elven guard.

"Brother! Oh, brother!" Maximilian laughed and shouted out in joy as he saw Adrian.

The lords heard the Second Prince's shouts and instinctively followed his gaze.

They knew that if Maximilian was calling to his brother, then it meant that the shame of the royal family had arrived.

It meant Adrian Leonberger, the idiot, and the lecher, had somehow found his way onto the battlefield.

They did not instantly recognize the First Prince, for it took them some time to discern his face on a body that was muscular instead of grossly obese. The boy was so very different than the creature that they had known.

“Brother! Adrian, over here!” In fact, if the Second Prince had not been calling his name, the nobles would not have known that it was the First Prince at all.

“Brother, I am glad to see you!” Maximilian cried out.

The First Prince did not even turn his head to look at his younger brother; he just kept on walking with a confident stride.

For the nobles, the scene was surreal, a strange sight indeed.

Elves were gathering silver light across their blades as they danced.

A prince who walked across a field of blood as if stepping on a crimson flower, and the cacophony of the battle that did not lessen for a single second.

It was only around the First Prince himself that silence reigned.

The King of the Orcs had noticed Adrian’s presence and had turned to him.

The First Prince finally came to stand before the Warlord.

“It’s good that my uncle has left half of you intact.”

The First Prince was here to claim the other half as his own.

“We finally meet,” Adrian added and started to laugh in the face of the Warlord.

The nobles watched as the First Prince laughed at such a terrible monster.

CHAPTER 76
NOT ONE, BUT MANY (1)

Adrian and the elves headed towards the Warlord, their steps and actions so fluent that none dared bar their way.

“What idiots, those nobles! They just stand around,” he stated. The soldiers of the north had come with him.

The lords and commanders of the central kingdom had been overwhelmed by the great roar of the Warlord, a sound that none have ever heard in this age. The real problem was the soldiers. They might have been able to hold the line, but their morale was too shaken to press on.

“The orcs pushed back by the northern reinforcements will come this way. If they do, we lack the numbers to push them back,” the commander said to the Second Prince. The men were barely blocking the orcs as such, yet it was clear that the orcs would be eradicated if the correct tactics were employed. Still, knowing such a thing was not the same as doing it, which was very true when it came to warfare.

“Call back the royal champion and the knights, I will take their place against the Warlord!” Adrian shouted as if hearing the commander’s concerns. Still, the First Prince’s order was hard to accept.

Only after the gifted Richter had led his knights against the orcs had the Warlord waded into battle, so the Count hesitated before ordering his knights away from the battle. The elves stood next to the First Prince, looking dead ahead. Only nineteen of them had cleared a path for prince Adrian across the bridge through the great green mass. Some said that nineteen knights were equal to a single one of these elves.

The knights had hesitated but quickly applied themselves to other spheres of the battle. The surviving Red Iron Chain Knights began to cull the orcs who had crossed the bridge at once. The battlefield was quickly cleared up.

“Square formation! Forward!” ordered Maximilian.

“Ha!” shouted the soldiers as they advanced.

“Forward, hold, hold… Charge!”

Both the royal family’s sons led from the front, not cowering in comfort like the nobles. The soldiers’ courage burnt ever brighter as the fire of their fighting spirit sputtered into life once more. From time to time, arrows tore into the orcs, well-aimed arrows that hit them in their heads.

“Look, the rangers of Balahard!”

The elite archers of Winter Castle had already formed their lines and were now firing volley after volley. Maximilian heard the sound of their words drift over the river and felt as if he was hallucinating.

“Your guys are not alone. We have come.”

“Iron Hawks! Fire!” ordered Count Brandenburg as he stepped forward and ordered the Iron Hawk archers to fire their longbows. They responded with vigor to his words as they sniped at the orcs. Some orcs were struck in the neck and died, while others, feeling no fear or pain, fought on heedless. They cared not for arrows in their necks or spears in their backs. They were rampaging beasts that only bore straight on.

The madness of the orcs easily snuffed out the spark of hope that had been lit in the hearts of the men.

“The soldiers are not aiding the knights!” came an officer’s call.

No matter how fiercely the knights fought, the front line infantry showed little interest in advancing and helping them. The advanced knights were isolated from their camp and were being crushed under orcish axes and spears. Some of the exhausted soldiers were captured by orcs and dragged off to their camp to be eaten. If things continued as they did, most of the knights would die before the defensive lines were reformed.

‘Bawooo wooo wooo!’

The sound of the warhorn rang out.

‘Bawooo wooo!’

The reinforcing Northmen on the opposite banks of the Rhinethes responded with hearty martial songs. Count Richter Lichestein and the other knights widened their eyes in surprise as they saw the relief force’s banner.

‘Bawooo wooo!’

Once more, the horn trumpeted, and this time the Warlord answered it with a roar. A change overcame the orcs, then.

The orcs had become berserk when their king had arrived. These same raving orcs now had their instincts repressed as the madness left their eyes. They frowned in confusion. Once more, the Warlord roared, and the First Prince answered him with a blow from the horn. The elves clashed their blades and hummed unknowable songs in their clear voices.

The roar of the terrible monster was drowned out by songs being sung and by the warhorn’s trumpeting. The battle changed drastically from that moment on, as the insanity had completely left the orcs’ eyes. Gone were the berserking monsters that had not feared their own deaths. Now, if an arrow struck a single orc, those around it became afraid. Gaps were appearing in the dense wall of orcs as some started to flee.

The orcs on the front lines fought fiercely on, but those in the second rank began to look around themselves.

“The time has come! Rush them!” the commander shouted.

Knights and soldiers charged and started to push the orcs back.

“Square one, charge!”

“Ha!”

Count Richter Lichstein charged as well upon the order, his sword at the ready. Dozens of javelins flew into the ranked orcs like a great swarm of angry wasps. The Iron Hawks were firing volley after volley of arrows.

“They’re backing down!”

Up until now, it was the human lines that have been broken. For the first time in the battle, the soldiers took heart, inspired by the fact that the orcish ranks were collapsing. Infantrymen rushed forward as they jabbed their spears into their enemies.

“Knights, advance!”

The knights roared their battle cries as they crashed into the front ranks of orcs, focusing on the segment where the orcish line had completely collapsed. The knights performed a bloody and gory dance as the orcs swiftly fell before them.

Count Richter Lichstein shook his blade clean of blood as he retreated from the melee. It was impossible for him to continue, as the Warlord’s energies had invaded deep into his Mana Rings, disrupting the flow of mana. Richter needed time to rest and regain some of his magical energies.

Fortunately, the tide of battle had turned to the point where the old knight could afford to step back. He had been prepared to die just a few moments before, so quickly had everything changed. On this battlefield, with the horrible powers of a monster such as the Warlord, nothing could be predicted with surety after the northern reinforcements’ arrival.

The strangest thing of all was who the person was who had led the reinforcements like an angel of salvation. He was the First Prince Adrian Leonberger, also known as the shame of the royal family. Who would have imagined such a thing?

Count Lichstein studied the battle after he had stepped from it. After the knights had left it alone, the monster that had completely turned the tide of the battle fought against the First Prince and the nineteen elves. The prince had blown upon his horn and then moved among the elves as he struck at the great orc with his sword.

That’s one brave fool; why hasn’t anyone stopped him?

Richter Lichstein laughed at the futility of it all as his eyes tracked the First Prince.

The swords of the elves could hardly penetrate the coruscating red energies that covered the monster like armor. The only thing they had managed to do was cut the cloth of the Warlord’s clothes. Only the First Prince’s blade had swept the red energy away, as he had been able to score a deep cut into the orc’s flesh. The Warlord himself was aware of who the true enemy was, as he focused upon a single blade far

more than the nineteen others.

Richter struggled to believe it even as he saw it with his own eyes. Even with an Aura Blade, he hadn't been able to injure the Warlord, and the elite knights were all unable to penetrate the red energy.

Now, a boy who had not even had his adulthood ceremony was achieving something that no one else had been able to do. Well, all but one, for Bale Balahard had gone beyond breaking through that red barrier: He had severed one of the monster's arms, and this on his very own, without any aid. Richter Lichstein now knew who the true champion had been and felt embarrassed at having denigrated the former Count Balahard in front of the other nobles on so many occasions. Richter Lichstein rebuked himself for his arrogance.

He was not alone in his shame.

Count Brandeburg had always been very proud of his Iron Hawk archers, believing them to be superior to the regular old Balahard rangers.

His suppositions had proved to be naught but illusions.

The rangers of Balahard now numbered less than a hundred, yet they were completely overpowering the orcs. They fired their bows and crossbows from afar, and when they got in real close to their foes, they drew their special knives. If the situation called for it, they battered the orcs back with shields.

In each of these spheres of battle, they excelled and could not be said to be less skilled than the central infantry or archers.

When they fired their bows, they were sharpshooters that took shots that the Iron Hawks would have thought impossible.

When they wielded their knives, their movements were more agile and fierce than many a swordsman.

With their shields, they stood steadier than many heavy infantrymen that Count Brandenburg had observed.

Their morale was excellent. Not one of the rangers had faltered since the battle had been joined. The same went for the northern knights, who also numbered less than a

hundred yet constantly encouraged the troops with songs.

And there, in the center of it all, was the First Prince. Richter couldn't figure out what the hell was going through Prince Adrian's head. Even in the middle of fighting with such a monster, he blew his horn whenever he got the chance.

The only certain thing was that every time the horn was blown, the Northern Army's banners shook in response. And as the banners touched the sky, the men of the north fought even harder, and the orcs became less and less ferocious.

The orcs were more like defeated soldiers, groaning as the blood flowed from their bodies.

The only thing that remained to be done was to let these orcs pay for every single drop of human blood they had spilled.

* * *

The first thing that I noticed was his lack of an arm. As I stared at the empty space beneath the Warlord's shoulder, the last image of my uncle came into my mind. He had pretended to be the handsome young knight as he chopped off the foreleg of the dragon.

I was impressed that my uncle, who had been left behind as we escaped, had not gone out in vain, that he had managed to claim the arm of an orcish king.

On the other hand, I was relieved that he had left me my share of the orc.

The Warlord gave a low growl, clearly in discomfort. The great beast was covered in its own blood, and it stared straight at me with death in its eyes. The emotions that fluttered through its eyes were surprisingly familiar to me.

There was the feeling of loss and anger – that feeling of a great loss due to arrogance was one that I knew; it was as if I was looking in a mirror.

The heart of this monster and my own soul were so similar, and I found that to be hilarious. We even shared the murderous intent of tearing one another apart, of ending the foe. The only difference between the two of us was that he viewed our meeting as coincidental, while I knew that it was an inevitable facet of my fate that had led me here.

“Are you a king because you reign, or do you reign because you are a king?” I asked the Warlord. He just snorted and cleaved the air before him with his spear. His was a face that cared not at all for my questions.

“Ah, I know the question seems difficult,” I said and asked it in another way. “If you have no subjects, are you still a king?”

The Warlord was breathing low now, his spear still at the ready as he studied the battlefield. I followed his gaze and saw what he saw.

He saw humans with renewed morale pushing the orcs back with force.

He saw the fluttering cloaks of elves as they aided the human army.

He saw the other human army that had attacked so suddenly and so fiercely, and he saw as they clove so fiercely into his orcish army.

His own forces, having known no other state than constant victory and constant advance, were being devastated as they faced attack from all quarters.

The Warlord stared at me, his face set in stone.

It seemed that he had only now realized what I was trying to do, but it was already too late for him.

He had been arrogant and overconfident, far too intoxicated by his string of successive victories.

How paltry had the resistance of the weak humans been! His had been the excitement of a being that had trampled over the humans and their castles and cities.

The fulfillment of his ambition of establishing his new kingdom in the affluent southern land had been so close at hand.

He had believed that he would break through the defenses upon the Rhinethes in no time, as he had done so many times before.

The Warlord had never suspected that my forces would smash into his rear and melt away his hopes and dreams like thawing snow.

“So what now, are you no longer king?” I asked the beast once more.

The Warlord stared at me and finally spoke.

“I have been king the king since I was born. I will always be the king.”

It was the first sound he had made that was not a bestial roar.

“This is the fate that I have been given.” He said in that deep voice of his. “I am still the king.”

I just laughed at the creature before me.

“If you are the king…”

In that second, a million thoughts flashed through my mind: Mockery of this dark green monarch and ridicule of myself, the fool.

I had accomplished many great feats through the ages, yet none of them were truly mine.

I am the king who has never been in power, the king of swords.

After my illustrious existence, I had been thrown into the shadows, similar to how the rotting corpse of a pauper was thrown into a ditch.

Only now that I had become a foolish man did I wish to regain my glory.

“…then I am the usurper!”

I roared my disillusionment at the incompetent fool king whose arse sat upon a throne made from dragon bone.

At that moment, I felt hatred for the monarch that had betrayed and abandoned his most loyal and courageous knight to the cold snows of the north and the hungry maws of the orcs.

My anger was directed against the warlords who had so cruelly taken what was dear to me.

{}-{ You are singing the [Extraordinary] song of [The Poetry of the Defeated King] }-{}

“Isn’t it mine, either those high halls,

Or that dignified throne?

There is nothing that is not my seat.”

These philosophies, and this poem, had been created within me as that wagon had carried my bruised body and my battered mind.

It was the first poem I had created out of hate and not with karma.

“Never think of honor, it has no use.”

The flame that had been blazing all over Twilight now became almost frozen, static.

“You will die a miserable death, just like an insignificant runt of an orc.”

The indigo flame of my blade had by now shifted into a dark blueish hue, the type of blue that a raven would see where it to fly over the deepest parts of an ocean.

“Waaghaaruh! Waaghaaaaruh!” came the Warlord’s fierce roar.

The great red energy that flowed around his spear, that mighty fervor of his, rose as if it would consume the entire world.

The elves had been humming their songs all this time, yet they now ceased to do so. Their dance, which had flowed like water flows over rocks, had faltered. The elven swordsman stepped back.

At that moment, I focused myself upon the chill that raced through me, for it felt as if I had been frozen from the deepest depths of my soul to the very tips of my fingers.

Ah, it has been a long time indeed!

Only now did I feel truly whole, for this absolute frigidity was closer to my true essence.

I had been born in the dark and cold soil of this word.

The Warlord's battle fervor, that red tsunami of overbearing energy, flew at me and only me.

His attack was born out of desperation as if killing me could end this battle and save him from destruction!

It seemed that he had forgotten; the hate that I held within my heart was not mine alone, just as this battle had not merely been between the two of us.

"Kill it!"

A dull noise resounded over the river. A fragmenting projectile had been fired from the defensive lines by a permanently installed siege-weapon.

"The Black Lancers are here!" someone called out.

Knights led by the one-eyed Quéon Lichtheim charged in under falling rain of steel.

"Charge! Charge!"

The Black Lancers sliced into the red energy as they concentrated their mana on the blades of their spears.

If I had not been there, the reckless charge of these knights would have been fleeting, as the Warlord's malicious and murderous might would have cleaved through them all in a matter of minutes.

Now though, I stood strong, and I would aid these Black Lancers, not like the last time I had thought with them when our defeat had been so total.

"I cut the scales from the dragon,

A dragon that could not be cut by any sword,

And I drink its steaming blood!"

"Let us sing, brothers, let us sing the [The Poem of the True Dragon]!"

What an extraordinary song of war they had chosen to sing, for it seemed that there existed another poem about the myth.

My entire world became hazy, dark, and I felt only the torment of my tearing heart and my scattering soul.

In that world, I could only see a dim dark-blue line, and it cut through the center of the Warlord's red energy.

And then, the Red Sea split before me.

CHAPTER 77
NOT ONE, BUT MANY (2)

Time passed slowly.

Fragments of the sundered red sea were scattered before me, some of it touching my arms, my shoulders, and my chest.

My skin felt aflame, and through that terrible pain, I could feel the presence of a distant mind.

The hazy world became clear.

I saw the Warlord before me, and his coruscating red armor of sparking battle fervor had disappeared.

He looked defenseless, showing true fear for the first time since we had begun our battle. Now was the only chance I would get.

I endured the pain and readied Twilight in a tight grip. I hoped, and continued hoping, that the tragic fact of his existence would come to an end there and then.

But was I too hasty? Was it even possible for me to deal a death blow, to reach him again with my sword?

The price of using an excessive amount of power could be great, indeed, and I had absorbed a lot of power from the knights' poem.

I struck at him, yet he swayed to one side; even then, I had only managed to channel half the intended amount of mana into my blade.

The power of the poem, the dragon's very own will, had flowed from me and left me empty. The dark blue flames of Twilight dissipated into nothingness.

[The Poetry of the Tue Dragon] had given me the strength to tear through the Warlord's shielding armor of fervor, but at the same time, the poem had robbed me

of the power needed to split the orc open and end its accursed existence.

And all the while, the Warlord's spear was still swinging at full momentum.

What a shitty situation!

I had lost my strength, and this boded very ill, for even if the Warlord's magic has also been broken, he was a huge, born as a monster while I was in the body of a teenager.

I knew that poets would call a situation such as this 'hitting a rock with an egg'. Still, I readied my blade. I had at least trained this body into a state of health over the past year, so that had to count for something against this hulking one-armed monstrosity and his spear.

I would rely on the slightest flicker of fire that still existed at the end of Twilight. I will not allow this tale to end in tragedy.

The Warlord was staring at me, grinding his teeth. I could see that he had noted my weakness, and the fires of victory once more blazed in those evil red eyeballs of his.

Suddenly, a spear as large as an iron pillar was heading straight for my nose. I twisted my body and stepped back in an instant, having turned to one side as I ducked beneath the swipe, yet the Warlord was fast as he turned his spear in a full circle above his head and stepped in for another jab at me. The spear's blade clipped me with its flat face, the force of it slamming into my chest.

I staggered back, yet I still managed to lunge forward with my arm and strike at the beast with my sword.

It sunk into his flesh, and I could feel the rough, scalloped texture of his skin brush against my hand.

A moment passed when his fervor uncomfortably resisted the nearness of my presence.

It felt as if I had placed my hand in an electric current – as if I had flown a wire kite in a thunderstorm.

Then, the resistance gave way, and I stared into the Warlord's face.

The King of the Orcs was embarrassed, and one could clearly see defeat written over his savage features.

He was staring at something, and I followed his gaze, seeing a great, gory red gash that had been carved at a diagonal angle way past his clavicle and through his collarbone. The great cut then moved ever so slightly, like fleshy tectonic plates, and then – Thud! – his entire shoulder slipped from his chest in a welter of gore, like a great chunk of ice that broke off from a glacier.

His arm flopped to the floor, still clutching the spear.

The Warlord gave a soft groan, a growl, opened his mouth wide, and then: "Graaaaaooooooooooo! Uuuuuhghhh, Graaaaooooooo!!!"

Through that rotten maw, he gave voice to a great roar of utmost pain and great anger.

At that very moment, the slowed passage of time started to flow swiftly for me once more.

"For Balahard!" a black shadow shouted as it streaked past me, and after it had passed, I saw that a black javelin had been thrown straight into the roaring Warlord's face. It looked exactly like the throwing spears that the Black Lancers preferred to use.

"Graaaaoouuuuaaa, Graaaaoooorraaaghh!" the Warlord roared in even greater pain, as he now had a spear that had been thrust neatly into his eye socket and the fleshy bits beyond it.

"Here is the gift of winter, you big green bastard!" Quéon Lichtheim shouted as he boldly marched up to the Warlord and punched it in its face.

The beast continued to roar, and then, after suffering such great pain, the King of the Orcs that none had thought would ever fall, fell.

"For Winter Castle!"

"For the men who fell in the north!"

The Black Lancers shouted and jeered at the monster as they jabbed their spears

into it and made their horses kick their shodden hooves sharply into its flanks.

“Stop, take them off! Stop!” the Warlord cried out in its crude language, sounding at once like a beast yelping in fear and a child sobbing inconsolably. The Black Lancers jumped from their horses, all charging as one as they pierced the great orc in a flash of spears and a shower of blood. The Warlord struggled as it was pin-cushioned, but the orc’s resistance was just ugly convulsions, for the beats had already lost two arms and had a piece of iron lodged in its brain.

“This fucking damnable monster!”

“Die! Fuck, die! Die!”

The Black Lancers were repeatedly spearing the orc, like a bunch of insane whalers. The Warlord’s body turned from green into a gory, pulpy red mess of meat. Nevertheless, the beast lived on through the entire ordeal. Its cries and pleadings become ever more miserable.

Hundreds of times, it was pierced by the spears, and at some point, one of its legs were hacked off and staked upon a spear, from which it hung like a grisly banner over the battlefield.

The dignity of a king was nowhere to be found if one studied the Warlord’s scattered parts.

It is how a being born as a king, a being that had fought as a king, and a being who till the end had wished to remain a king had died.

The number of times the Black Lancers’ spears had pierced him reflecting the numbers of the soldiers and knights who had died under the tide of monsters that the Warlord had unleashed upon Winter Castle.

It was the miserable death that had been accorded to the killer of my uncle.

“Agh… uggghh…” the Warlord sputtered, and then its leg finally relaxed.

He was kneeling on his stump and his remaining leg, kneeling in a crimson pool of his own blood.

My vision was blurred as I took in the scene. Something kept scratching against my

teeth, so I spat it out.

I spat out a handful of dark red blood, and I felt joy upon knowing the cruel Warlord had finally died.

I had a handful of my own lifeblood to offer up in mourning to those who would never return – a piece of longing for the uncle I had lost and a piece of repentance for the stupidity of my past.

Even though it was just a handful of blood, many things poured out of me in that single moment.

『An amazing thing has been achieved upon this day』

『The first verse of [Poetry of the Defeated King] has been completed』

『You have gained insights into the deeper workings of Muhunshi』

I heard these messages storm through my ears, and that sound was as fierce as my renewed spirit.

* * *

The very instant that the Warlord fell, the orcs started to flee en masse. Not a shred of dignity could be found in these invaders that had so ravaged the north. They were just frightened beasts that fled from their pursuers.

And as every hunter knows, a wounded beast could never be allowed to flee. The humans made sure that the fleeing orcs paid a heavy price for their cowardice.

“Knights! Pursue the surviving orcs, and rally the cavalry to ride with you!”

Upon the commander’s orders, the knights and cavalrymen mounted up and scattered all across the land as they tracked the groups of fleeing monsters. The soldiers that remained cared for the wounded; they recovered their dead and cleared the battlefield of all else.

The soldiers kept stealing glances at the center of the field as they went about their assigned duties. In the exact middle of a group of five-hundred soldiers and knights, the body of a great monster had been staked upon many spears. Those who were

gathered around these grisly banners were the troops of Balahard. These men had kept their silence even when the survivors of the central army had loudly cheered the fact that the orcs had finally been defeated. They all just stood around the remains of the Warlord; their backs turned to the south.

“Are we supposed to go there?” one of the central nobles asked. “I saw earlier when they took in His Highness the First Prince, he had been greatly hurt, I think.” Other nobles nodded at his words, yet not one of these aristocrats dared approach the area where the troops of Balahard stood vigil. Maximilian had approached them, though.

* * *

When I returned from driving the orcs over the bridge with our infantry, I found my brother Adrian crying as he lay face down in the bloody mud under the spears upon which the Warlord’s carcass had been mounted.

I could not imagine what things, what thoughts, were flashing through my brother’s mind.

He had remained a strong prince even after so many good people have died at Winter Castle. When he had survived that great charge, and when we had left the castle, he had been loaded into a wagon, unconsciouses, or so it seemed. Instead of spending his waking moments in mourning, he had planned on how to destroy the enemy.

I had seen anger in him, but little sorrow.

And now, there he was, my strong older brother crying sadly into the earth.

I approached him but had nothing comforting to say.

I was not alone in that, for everyone around me stood silent and unmoving – everyone except Adrian’s champion, Arwen Kirgayen.

After searching the area of land beyond the bridge where the orcs had camped, she had come to us, and in her hands, she carried a great banner. She passed without hesitating through the soldiers as she headed to the gathered troops of Balahard.

She finally came before my brother and knelt before him, her knee squelching into the mud.

* * *

The First Prince had by now sat upright, a blank expression plastered on his face.

“Your Highness, I, Arwen Kirgayen, have completed your orders and now return to you once more.”

She had lured the orcs, just as her master had commanded her to do. She had then remained in the defensive lines to guard over the Second Prince and ultimately report her observations to Adrian.

She then gave her report.

“Of the twenty-nine Balahard cavalry that had followed me in our diversionary operation, all twenty-nine were slain. The only survivors of the mission were Bernardo Eli and me.”

Maximilian studied the faces of Balahard’s men upon this news, wondering if they would look ill upon Arwen.

They seemed to bear her no ill will.

“Seven of the nineteen remaining Black Lancers were killed.

“Of the Second Balahard Ranger Company, forty-three out of hundred-and-twenty-four were slain.”

“Seventy-two out of the hundred-and-ninety-eight soldiers of the Fourth Balahard Infantry Company have died.”

Arwen remained on her knees as she continued to list other statistics on the general situation.

Maximilian strongly felt that her timing was wrong. He thought it was cruel to report the dead in such a factual manner so soon after the battle. He even thought that Arwen’s report would make his brother cry again, but Adrian did not cry.

The First Prince had merely stayed seated, receiving the news with a grim face. He then rose to address those around him.

“Everyone… Good work,” Adrian praised the survivors, with his voice cracked and almost bursting with emotion.

“Your Highness, I gift you with the Warlord’s banner,” Arwen Kirgayen said as she politely offered him the thick shaft.

“Let’s go back,” the First Prince said as he grabbed the flagpole without unfurling the banner itself, breaking with custom.

“Let’s return to our fortress.”

* * *

Even before the field of battle had properly been cleared, the northern army had left.

After dividing their forces into labor squads, the central nobles had come together to plan future work. Yet, they became very confused when they heard that those who had contributed the most to the victory were leaving for the north.

The commander had stepped forward, strongly encouraging the First Prince to stay and observe the situation with them. Adrian did not listen.

“I have work to do,” was all that he had said. He had hurried along, then shouting over his back that he had something very important to do in the north.

“Brother, I will follow you,” Maximilian said.

“No, return to the capital. You have your duties as a prince, brother, your own job to do,” Adrian stated as he put his hand on his brother’s shoulder and graced him with a deep and meaningful look.

Even though no further words were spoken, Maximilian somehow knew what his job was to be.

“We will see each other again soon enough,” Adrian had greeted Maximilian, and then he left for the north.

After the Northmen had left, those that remained had to suffer the headaches of reconstruction and retribution.

“How must one treat those who have never even heard the word honor, much less possess a single a sliver of it in their craven hearts?”

“Since they seem to share the same heart, they have already offered to pay money to mollify us after their cowardice. My lords, I don’t think their tax is so small.”

“When the northerners were here, we could have marched, but now these cowards and their troops outnumber us.”

“It’s a shame, really, that we have to deal with all these petty matters. Is this my prize for risking my life in battle?”

The central nobles now had to decide the fates of their fellows who had fled from the bridge’s defense. They also discussed how to repair the damage inflicted upon the central army during the battle.

The problems were complicated, and the solutions not self-evident.

“Still, you must be glad that you fought and saved the bridge, no?” Count Brandenburg lightly scolded the commander and the nobles.

Those around him laughed and said that he spoke true.

* * *

The northern army marched from the Rhinethes straight to the province of Balahard.

Finally, they arrived at Winter Castle.

The traces of their hasty retreat were still much in evidence before the south gate of the fortress. Count Vincent Balahard and his forces awaited the army in front of this gate.

“Your Highness, you are back!” Vincent exclaimed in greeting.

Adrian just gave a curt nod to the knight beside him, who then opened the lids of large chests that stood upon a wagon.

The various pieces of the Warlord’s carcass were removed one by one. Its head, still attached to its torso, came out first, the selfsame head that had cried out so terribly

in fear and pain.

“It has been hacked into pieces. I can barely recognize its shape,” Vincent said, pretending to be calm, yet his eyes and trembling body proved that he was anything but calm. “Where’s the other arm?” he managed to ask.

“Oh, one of its arms were cut off by your father, so I have no idea where it is. The beast never told me.”

Vincent closed his eyes upon hearing these words but quickly opened them again as he tried to maintain his mask of faux serenity.

“My father did not fight in vain, then,” Vincent said. He then ordered that the Warlord’s head be removed and stuffed separately. Soldiers groaned as they lifted the chests off the wagon and carried them to the castle to begin their grim labor.

“Your journey must have been hard. Please, let’s go inside.”

Even upon this invitation from Vincent, the First Prince did not move. Without saying anything, he removed a roll of cloth that had been tied to his back and held it out to Vincent.

“What is this?”

“It is the Warlord’s banner.”

At that very moment, the cold northern wind blew in from the Blade’s Edge Mountains.

The banner of the Warlord unfurled, and that final trace of the brief kingdom that the orcs had carved out fluttered in the wind – a banner torn, tattered, and faded.

“Ah, now the day will never come when I will beat your highness at catching flags.”

The First Prince shook his head as his gaze swept over the walls of Winter Castle.

“Mount this banner on your highest spire, where everyone shall see it through the ages as a symbol of the iron will of Winter Castle.”

Adrian looked around at the gathered soldiers.

“The master of this banner is Balahard!” he declared.

They had all fought and struggled and finally gained the victory. Only now had Adrian declared the great triumph that they had won on the Rhinethes, and he only declared it here, beneath these walls.

The survivors of Winter Castle cheered.

* * *

“Say that again,” the King said with a frown.

“Your Majesty, the First Prince has refused to return.”

The King’s frown deepened as he listened to the messenger.

“Say that again!” the king commanded as deep anger crept into his voice.

The messenger trembled under the king’s wrathful attention. Yet, he had a family to feed and debts to pay, so he had no choice but to do his job. He closed his eyes tightly, and delivered the full message, delivered the words of Prince Adrian Leonberger.

“Your Majesty, His Highness the First Prince said that he would return by himself in due time, as he sees fit.”

CHAPTER 78
REVEALED ONLY AFTER THE FALL (1)

The time that the orcs had wandered through the north had not been long.

It had been two months at most, and they did little damage as Count Balahard's cavalry had ridden out and then funneled them away from settlements, allowing many cities to escape their flight. Nevertheless, the overall damage the north had suffered in the war had been considerable.

Nine cities had become necropolises, and the nine armies that had once guarded them had been swept away under the orcish tide.

Countless numbers of people who had failed to evacuate had been slaughtered. The economic and human damage that the north had suffered was incalculable.

The worse wound, though, was the damage done to the spirits of the northerners.

So what kind of place was the north?

Countless rivers of blood had flown through this land before the walls of Winter Castle stood as the tall bulwark against the hunger of monsters.

There was not a single place where the earth and the snow had not once been stained crimson with the spent lifeblood of innocents. Many had then come together to protect this land from monsters, to protect those that were also too helpless to defend themselves.

It was only then that the fortress's tall walls had been raised, and only then could the north truly become a realm fit for humans.

The past of the north was a past of dedication and sacrifice. For the northerners, such a gloried past was the proud history of their ancestors and was the spiritual banner that gave them heart in those harsh climes.

This proud history and spirit had then been trashed by the nobility, by the lords.

These descendants of heroes had fled before the war had even broken out, while their ancestors had protected the people by tooth and nail.

And so, the northerners who stood to fight the orcs were devastated by this betrayal.

While they argued whether they would stand and fight or not, a messenger from Balahard had appeared and urged them to leave the territory.

However, not all those who marched were refugees who chose to evacuate.

Count Balahard was gathering troops to his banner, and the survivors of Winter Castle were preparing for war once more.

Two thousand soldiers waited to see the banner of the Balahards, had waited with hopeless hope.

When they finally stood under the Triple Shield, they knew: How long the Balahards had been waging their lonely war, and how the northern lords had turned away from their pleas for aid. They heard how all those selfsame lords had fled like cowards, which brought resentment and relief to these soldiers' hearts in equal measure.

Still, they felt fortunate to have at least one noble left, and that remaining one had paid homage to the scions of the noble family who had fought countless wars that no one knew of, and this for many cold centuries. And this last noble had paid his undying respect to the knights and soldiers who had died, fighting to the very end.

These soldiers heard such tales and gathered under the Triple Shield banner of the Balahard family to fight together.

True enough, they were just ordinary folk and not real soldiers. They had never received proper training, not to mention that they had never learned how to fight ferocious monsters.

Never having held swords and never having fought monsters, they couldn't even say that they were men who had ever risked their lives.

Still, when it came to the bow and the ax, the story takes on a completely different turn.

These northerners were born with axes in hand and arrows in their quiver.

One had to know how to shoot true in a barren land where animals were scarce, and one had to fell trees by the ax if one wished to have any chance at surviving the harsh winters.

They were excellent trappers and trackers as well, yet they viewed such skills as nothing special. It just so happened that what these men grew up with were the skills of the ranger, and so it came to be that the Winter Castle Rangers started to train these men.

Certainly, they couldn't become full rangers after just a short training session before they had reached the battle lines. Moreover, it would be impossible for them to reach the level of the Winter Rangers of Balahard, who were said to possess the most outstanding skill as rangers upon the entire continent.

However, these men had already met the necessary conditions, and all that was left for them was to acquire the indomitable fighting spirit of the Balahad Rangers through practice.

And a real battle was on the way, a battle against legions of orcs who were led by a great monster called the King of the Orcs, a monster unequaled by any that had existed for many generations. Many of these new soldiers died during that battle, yet more had survived. Those who did survive refused to return to their hearths and their homes.

They all expressed their intentions to continue serving, and so the new Count Balahard had accepted them, forming a new Ranger Corps.

* * *

It would usually have been impossible, as volunteers were viewed with suspicion, conscripts more so. Some might have been spies for their former lords. Yet, what of the great weapon stockpile?

Most of the lords that would rise already had their sons dead or in prison, and their younger children would probably not be able to fulfill the full duties of a lord.

Ultimately, the responsibility of the armaments and the nobles' punishment was allocated to the office of the Second Prince.

Maximilian decided to demand great sums of money as compensation for the sinful

cowardice of the nobles who had fled from the defense of the Rhinethes. The other nobles, including Count Brandeburg, agreed with the prince's decision. These nobles now had to bankroll reconstruction and rearmament after the orcs had ravaged the realm, and they knew they would pay for their sins till the end of their days. The money they had paid was just so that they could live on as disgraced fugitives.

Even those that had no part in the war were burdened with the cost of it. Twenty-three of the thirty-six families in the central region paid enormous sums of money, and about half of that entire amount went to the Balahard family. Although the war was over, the atmosphere in the north was still the same as during the war. The major cities had become naught but empty fields, and the families of dead lords battled for succession.

Many who had noble blood in them died, silent and forgotten. Messengers then came from the new Count Balahard, or more precisely, from the First Prince.

He had summoned all the nobles who were in the line of succession to Winter Castle, and he himself would choose the successor of each and every house.

It was ridiculous! Normally, the royal family would have rallied against such an infringement of the nobility's right to exercise judgment over their personal and familial affairs. However, no protest came.

For hundreds of years, the Balahard family had just concerned themselves with guarding the border between the Blade's Edge Mountains and the kingdom. Now, they exercised their political power for the first time in centuries as they stood behind Prince Adrian's demands.

Moreover, the First Prince's legend and how he had battled against the orcs did not make his demands easy to reject. When the northern nobles miserably died while fleeing, the eldest son of the royal family had fought from the front and led the north to victory.

The northern nobles were far too pragmatic to believe still the unrestrained rumors of Adrian Leonberger: Lecher, idiot, and royal shame.

Thousand of northerners had, after all, witnessed that terrible battle between the Warlord and the First Prince. Even if they hadn't, the scars of the battle were well engraved upon Prince Adrian's body.

So there they were: The Balahard family, ancient guardians of the north, and the First Prince, who had come to be called the Savior of the North.

Had the prince fled from the battle, the nobles would have scoffed at his message. But now, as he was the Savior of the North, how could they dare to ignore it?

The young men and women who had suffered through the war were no longer the gentle sheep they had been in the past. Not one house lacked training in the martial arts, and every villager held the swords and shields of their ancestors with as much willpower as they could muster.

It had become clear to the people that they could not trust the protection of so-called noble lords. All across the north, the nobility was rapidly losing their political powers. The First Prince had already fully centralized the military, and the common folk became sick of cowardly aristocrats that lorded over them. Only a slight provocation could cause the commoners to rise in revolt and wipe out the members and even the memory of noble families.

So it came to be that the lords left out of the loop had to sit in their lonely corners, eat their mustard and accept the successors appointed by the First Prince. The people who took over their families had to make a vow of fealty to Prince Adrian Leonberger. The war reparations paid to the Balahards by the central nobles were then paid out to these new northern nobles if they pledged their loyalty.

The money, in turn, allowed them to consolidate their authority without question.

For the nobles who had been skipped over in the lines of succession, having to pledge to the new lords was impossible. They resented the new lords and were resented back in turn.

Sure enough, these dissatisfied souls sent messengers to tattle to the capital.

They sorely wanted to regain what they saw as their rightful titles and were even prepared to take it by the blades if other nobles would lend them the troops.

Some of the craftier ones greatly exaggerated the situation in the north to the royal family, hoping to take advantage of the discord between the King and his eldest son. Their efforts proved useless.

They had to contend with the First Prince's political power, who now had the full

might of twenty noble houses, including the Balahards, behind him. Only those trusted by the royal family even received replies, and these were curt dismissals with short justifications.

The King's response was exactly the same as during the war, for he had abandoned the north a second time!

All he did was order Adrian back to the capital to resume his place as heir of the Leonberger dynasty, and yet the First Prince had even ignored this decree! He had written to his father that he would return only if the time was right.

The new Count Balahard and his knights were loyal to the First Prince and were excited by his reforms.

It could be stated with certainty that the north was now beyond the rule of the King and the capital.

Several scheming nobles then contacted the imperial ambassadors, for they knew that the empire would not look kindly upon the large-scale conscriptions that had been enforced in the north.

However, no matter how long these nobles waited, the ambassadors of the empire made no reply.

The true fact of it was that the imperial ambassador, Marquis Montpellier, was now in a great hurry to snuff out the coal that had fell into his boot.

"You have reports from the home country, as I have instructed?"

"As you say, I have made my report without a single error."

"And what is the answer?"

"I observed the situation, and have made a few discreet promises of financial support so our defenses can be strengthened, I have also… ended a few sources of rumor."

The Marquis of Montpellier gave contented sighs of relief at the words of his agent.

The recent turmoil in the northern part of the Leonberg kingdom had become a big

issue that even endangered his own position.

The ambassador of the empire to the kingdom was given two missions.

Firstly, those unscrupulous serfs who once got it into their heads to fight against the empire could not be allowed to gain the same level of might that had allowed them to do so in the first place.

Secondly, those uncultured serfs were not allowed to become too weak and, in so doing, stop acting as a barrier between the large armies of monsters in the north and the empire itself.

Suffice to say; neither mission was easy. And to have both missions at the same time? Hah!

Now, the kingdom was about to collapse, and Montpellier knew that his misjudgment of the situation was partly to blame.

He hadn't taken the orcish invasion in the north seriously and had sent out agents to hinder the Leonberger family's response to the situation. Montpellier had figured that the kingdom's unrefined men would use this 'monster crisis' as the perfect excuse to build up their armed forces and expand their arsenals.

Especial pressure had been placed on the northern nobles to send no aid to the Balahard family. Montpellier had figured that he could, through bribes and threats, damage the Balahard family via a horde of Orcs, for had they not openly revealed their dislike for the empire and its enlightened ways? Yes!

It was a big mistake.

I had tried to corner a minor competitor, and in so doing, almost burned down the market square.

The turmoil in the north had been far more serious than the Marquis's wildest estimates, and the fortress of the Balahard family had collapsed, swamping that entire part of the kingdom with those damnable green beasts.

The central government managed to defeat the orcs, but if the true course of events became known in the empire, the Montpellier family could become subject to severe sanctions.

Ah, so I was forced to send my agents out to stop rumors and spread counter-rumors, to reduce the truth of what part I had played in damaging the kingdom. This way, my position will be maintained!

“Fuck!” the Marquis of Montpellier swore, agitated by the state of reality. It has only been a few years since King Leonberger was discovered recruiting knights from outside his kingdom without imperial knowledge. He had been betrayed by one of his confidants, and it had been possible for imperial agents to infiltrate the operation and blackmail the King, further weakening centralized royal authority. Though, since the events of that time, diplomacy between kingdom and empire had become decidedly cool, if not downright frigid.

Although the Leonberg Kingdom was a small country, it had the longest and the hardest history of fighting against the empire.

And my job is to make sure that we don’t war with those uncultured peasants again.

Still, the fiasco with the orcs and his involvement in the affair had not improved peace prospects. Such poor judgment on his part greatly endangered his political life.

“Well, this First Prince can be a blessing if he wants to be,” said the Marquis of Montpellier to himself and laughed.

“So, there is a man who buys the knights of our glorious empire, all to help Marquis’ Boshin, and then this man, well, he defends my country just so that the Marquis can stay! I thought it would be useless, as he was an incompetent, but no! He was surprisingly helpful.”

The prince who was thrown out because he thought he couldn’t build the kingdom that should serve as the shield against the empire was unexpectedly resourceful.

Anyone with the skills of Adrian Leonberger deserved to be made into an imperial puppet!

“Although it was uncomfortable to reveal it at a banquet the other day, I was able to forgive that much, as he was a man who could not distinguish between a fine wine and a tankard of mud.”

He was the man who had traded in imperial knights, after all, so his base personality could surely not have changed.

“I have to try my hand a little, see what I can stir up.”

Montepellier was now intent on putting this man who had stepped from the line of succession slap-bang into the center stage once more.

* * *

At that very moment, Adrian Leonberger, First Prince, whom the Marquis had decided to groom as a puppet king, was quite happy.

He was overjoyed as he studied the treasure he had accidentally discovered.

“Hah, I thought it had been completely ruined,” he said as he looked at the volunteers, visitors to the fort, who now stood before him.

“But no, it’s not ruined.”

It was if he had recovered that which had been lost.

CHAPTER 79
REVEALED ONLY AFTER THE FALL (2)

Four hundred years ago, I had sown a great many seeds to allow humans to settle in this barren land.

Those among them who possessed excellent qualities were given mana hearts of great value.

Those who did not meet my exacting standards received mana hearts suitable for the vessels that would contain them.

And all these fleshy vessels had grown well beyond my expectations.

They were the ones who had decimated the great armies of monsters and opened the way to reach Kwangryong.

They were the ones who had defeated the empire's army that was marching for the kingdom of Leonberg.

These humans existed so that I could sleep in peace and without worry.

When I awoke after my four-hundred-year long slumber, not one of them remained.

I thought that they had all fallen, that all those that valued Muhunshi over mana rings were gone, leaving no trace that they ever strode this land. I thought that everything had fallen into ruin.

But no, I was wrong, for their descendants came to the fortress.

* * *

I reached the empty courtyard before the castle, as I was avoiding Vincent, who had kept hounding me. I unknowingly halted, and in the distance, I saw a group of grim figures gathered around a bonfire.

Northerners who had realized that the nobles could no longer protect them had come here in their droves to enlist in my army, and this group consisted of some of these northerners.

They were a couple of men and women, and it was their presence that had made me halt.

Their clothes were shabby and weapons in a terrible state. Even if they were volunteer enlistees, they looked like beggars, and their appearance spoke of a stupidity incongruous with that of professional military personnel.

Nevertheless, I was convinced that among them were the descendants of old knights who had disappeared from this realm, and I didn't need any special powers to realize this. Their scent was familiar and had awakened my nostalgia.

"Your Royalty!" a Ranger saluted me casually. He was a friend of mine, one of the senior rangers I had often gone out on patrol with.

"It's quite cold today. Anyway, what is going on here?"

"I am patrolling the grounds and classing the green beards," he replied.

"I'm here for the volunteers as well, so don't mind me and do what you have to do."

I turned, and the ranger gave a sympathetic laugh. He only laughed for a while, though, as he soon began to marshal the volunteers, his face wolf-like.

"Hey, you, a man that can't stand this cold sure as hell won't be able to scale that wall, and a soldier that can't scale a wall has no place in this castle!"

The volunteers only stared at the ranger.

"Hah, you all look so grim and dark! Leave the fire and stand in a line!"

The ranger continued to shout nonsensical drill-sergeant commands; his words were not saintly at all. I did not aid his commands and instead seated myself by the fire as the volunteers lined up in front of the ranger.

"Left out. Next! Left out. Next!"

So cold and impersonal was the enlistment screening that I figured it was just too much; the ranger did not even ask their names, let alone their place of origin. He simply studied their bodies and made guesses as to their talents. If they fell below his high standards, he ruthlessly eliminated the possibility of their service as soldiers.

It was a bit harsh, but nothing that I couldn't understand.

In terms of the number of troops, Balahard now had more soldiers than even before the war with the Warlord. The financial situation was such that not many more soldiers could be employed.

Even if enormous funds had flown in from the central lords' reparations, the time had come to select quality recruits rather than enlist more rubble.

Under the circumstances, only those who were talented had any reason to be accepted. So all those who had come here from afar and had been denied now realized that they had made a wasted journey. Regardless, the curtness of the ranger saved me time.

"Next!"

The line was soon shortened, and the turn of the man and woman whom I had been watching came. The man stepped forth first.

The ranger just jerked his head to one side, not even bothering to speak. The man took up his spear and swung it a few times.

"Ah, skill!"

Along with his obvious skill, the thick scent of mana spread all over the place.

My nostrils were drenched in that smell.

Woah!

The spear vibrated as it glowed slightly. The ranger's face hardened even more as he watched this display.

"So, what, you were some kind of knight?"

The men shook his head and introduced himself as a wandering mercenary.

Whether a knight or a sellsword, he was clearly a skilled person who knew how to employ auras.

The ranger did not realize this man's skill, and he shouted at him as he was one of the common rabble applicants.

"Your name?" I asked as I stood up and shook my ass clean.

"Gallahan," the man answered arrogantly.

"I know who this is," I told the ranger after I had beckoned him over. At my words, the ranger shut his mouth and reeled his anger in.

"Last name?" I asked, but Gallahan just shook his head at me.

"Because I am a commoner, I have no surname."

The ranger's anger had made the recruit guarded, and even if his tone was not that arrogant, he seemed quite confident in his skills.

Anyway, I knew that it was a lie. Even if he had stated that he held no surname as a commoner, I knew the truth was not as simple as that.

Others did not know, but I knew all too well.

I had chosen in ages past twelve great knights, of excellent character, to pass on their superior form of mana hearts.

Five of them, masters of siege and defense, were sent south to act as shields against the large armies of the empire.

That shield of five was named 'The Silver Lions.' The seven other knights I chose to be my sword, and they became known as 'The Blood Lions.'

Even in this age, the title of Lion remains an honorific granted to quad-chain knights, though I have thus far not even heard a trace or a whisper of my erstwhile Blood Lions.

Gallahan must surely have been a descendant of one of the seven forgotten Blood Lions.

I summoned the status screen of Gallahan to study his powers. His aptitudes and characteristics confirmed my suspicions, so I ordered him to wait.

“I will conduct the next assessment,” I told the ranger, who bowed and stepped back. The woman who had accompanied Gallahan stepped forward, carrying a longbow as tall as me.

“I am Boris, and I too have no surname,” she introduced herself without being prompted. Once more, I knew that the lack of her last name was a lie.

This time, she did not need to show her skills or mana; for the bow she carried was one that I knew all too well.

Although it looked crude in its construction, it had once been used by a Blood Lion named ‘Jingu.’

I knew that very few knights would have the strength even to pull its string back halfway, so when she spanned it taught all the way, I immediately shouted “Pass.”

Boris, who had been on the point of loosing her arrow, frowned at me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

She gave no answer, yet I could see that she was irked by the fact that she had been approved for service before showing her skills.

“Take a look at the others, I must go,” I told the ranger, and I then bode that Gallahan and Boris follow me.

“Now, speak honestly, speak the truth,” I told them when we reached an abandoned warehouse.

“What truth are you talking about?” one of them asked, both of them still keeping up their pretense that they did not know what the hell I was getting at.

Their attitudes were regrettable, yet I could not be mad at them. I knew why they had to hide their heritage.

After the wars of the past, Blood Lions who had fought hard on the northern front were deployed to the southern border. They were swords through and through, and could not merely defend like the Silver Lions.

So, they instead attacked the empire's mainland.

They were not mere knights or sword masters; no, they were superhumans who led their forces while singing [Heroic] poems.

Before their relentless onslaught, the imperial army collapsed helplessly. The empire then had the shameless task of establishing a new capital in the far west after their original eastern capital had been conquered.

It came as no surprise that the empire hated the Blood Lions more than anyone else.

When the Leonberg Kingdom had stood strong, such hatred could not flow past its walled borders and great castles.

In contrast, the current kingdom was incapable of erecting a fence, much less constructing walls. Thus, it was very wise for these descendants of the Blood Lions to keep their identities hidden, traveling the world in total obscurity.

They had sinned not yet were still sinners, and a weak kingdom with weak princes would do nothing to protect them.

"But who are you?" Boris asked me cautiously.

Instead of answering with words, I unleashed my mana. They immediately became alert to any sudden actions from me.

"If you have hidden with the name of your family for all these years, you will surely recognize the origin of their strengths."

The mana hearts that beat in their breasts had been gifted to their ancestors by me when I had been a sword.

Also, the [Heroic] poems sung by the Blood Lions had been derived from the passages of the [Mythic] poems created by the Dragon Slayer.

If these two had inherited both the complete mana hearts and poetry of their

forebears, there could be no way for them to mistake the energies that I was unleashing.

The Dragon Slayer's heart was the unique gift of the Leonberger dynasty.

"I, Gallahan, recognize the soul of the Leonberger King!"

"I, Boris, sees His Highness the Prince!"

As I had expected, both of them knelt before me, bowing their heads.

I was greatly satisfied when I looked at them, for it felt as if a familiar treasure had wandered from afar on its feet only to enter my embrace.

All that remained was the question of how to employ them and make them useful.

* * *

Though Boris and Gallahan had recognized me, they still chose not to reveal their family names. It seemed that the mere presence of a decent royal was still not enough to earn their trust.

I was in the body of a Leonberger, and the Leonbergers had forgotten of the service and talents of the Blood Lions.

The two of them had been able to wander the world because I had wiped out the eyes and ears of the empire in the last war.

Thus, I decided to take the time and earn their trust. For the time being, they would be placed where they could develop themselves the best.

In actual fact, Gallahan's talents fell short of Arwen's, not even to mention Adelia's.

He had no reason to be disappointed, for his ancestor had also possessed the least amount of martial skill among the Blood Lions.

However, I knew that that ancestor had possessed a special talent that the other Blood Lions had lacked.

Her horsemanship had almost been on a magical level, and she had trampled over

her enemies as a river flows over rocks.

Gallahan had inherited her S-class horsemanship, and there was a place in Winter Castle that would suit Gallohan's talents well.

"I know your lancers are few after the war, Quéon, so for the while, can you train this man? He will prove quite useful to you."

I had left Gallohan with the one-eyed Quéon Lictheim, who commanded the Black Lancers, a group of elite knights who had greatly aided me in the battle against the Warlord. The fact that the training would be hard was a bonus, and I had made sure to tell Quéon that Gallahad was a bit pretentious and arrogant.

A few days later, a rumor reached me that Quéon had over-interpreted my request a bit and had beaten Gallohan terribly.

I did not mind, for suffering makes a man stronger, and the faster one suffers, the quicker one learns.

Such a training philosophy is applied in equal terms to Boris. Like her ancestors, she was a born ranger and sniper, so I made sure she was constantly in the patrols that entered the Blade's Edge Mountains. These patrols conducted numerous hit and run assaults.

In many ways, her training was far harsher than that of Gallahan's.

Mana rings can only shatter the mana of mana hearts if their energies collided. Boris was an archer and so did not have to deal with Knights of the Ring. She had great talent and would be very useful in this age where rings dominated.

Certainly, she wasn't capable of killing knights in the same way as her ancestors, but this was more because she held no faith in the [Heroic] poem than any lack of talent.

And if you had to deal with monsters in the mountains day by day, your natural talents will arise, even if they aren't that great.

"Arwen, Bernardo, you are to accompany Boris and hunt alongside her."

Arwen immediately understood and accepted my order. Bernardo Eli just groaned. As always, his mewling complaints fell on deaf ears.

And so Boris went out to hunt with the knights, and her task was no easy one for ogres and trolls were not easy prey.

Still, her mission was not impossible, as the Muhunshi she had inherited was created in the hunt for monsters that were once ruled by Gwangryong. If she were lucky, she would be able to write other poems that she could use more frequently than her [Heroic] poem.

It was also planned that Gallahan and the Black Lancers would make sorties around the entrance of the mountain pass to seek out real battles.

So within a year, I knew that Gallahan and Boris would become quite strong, as Winter Castle was the best place for someone who wanted to build up their karma.

“Your Highness, a messenger has come from the royal family.”

I eagerly met the man. Surely, it was another order for my return. Even if I had expressed my unwillingness to do so, the King had been disgustingly persistent.

“Your Highness, His Majesty knows well what Your Highness has endured in the north. He urges you to return to the royal palace as soon as possible, for he wishes to praise you and bestow a worthy gift for your efforts.”

Through the mouth of the messenger came a request that was softer in tone than those that had come before.

“Fuck all that,” I spat, for I was not fooled.

The very instant I returned to the capital, all my efforts in the north would have been for naught, as my wings would be clipped and broken once more. The King on that throne hated me more than was necessary,

The prospect of returning had not even crossed my mind since I had relocated to Winter Castle.

“Tell them that I shall return on my own if the time comes, and tell them to stop sending these fucking messages!”

The messenger turned pale at hearing my harsh words; one would almost think I had sentenced him to death. Certainly, as a bearer of bad news to the King, he could

die if he were to face the monarchs' full wrath.

Adelia called the messenger to one side and refined the words he had to convey to the King. My will was the same, as well as the conclusion that I would not be returning. The only difference was that the tone had been softened.

"You must have struggled on your long journey, so go ahead and rest before your return," the messenger was told, and he drooped his shoulders despondently.

My next visitor stepped before me, a hooded man who had been standing to one side. He now removed the hood with a flourish, and the face that he revealed was the last face I wanted to see at that moment.

"Your Highness, it has been such a long time. You don't know how relieved I am to see you, after all these recent troubles."

And so, the dog of the empire stood before me, smiling his gentle little smile.

CHAPTER 80
REVEALED ONLY AFTER THE FALL (3)

The Marquis Montpellier acted very politely towards me.

Still, I knew he was just a dog dressed in human skin.

The lords of the center and the north had been surprised by this little dog's loud barking, and so had allowed themselves to be tied to posts.

Those brave men who did not have to die in the winter winds died all the same.

In other words, Marquis Montpellier, who stood before me, was the main reason that the north had become a field of bones.

My mind soared to great heights of anger and hatred. I wanted to kill this man there and then, but I knew that there were ways to handle things subtly.

Thus, I had to endure his presence and hold my anger.

All the while, a thousand murderous impulses flashed through me, and I went through countless reasons so as to not kill the Marquis.

Then, a different thought entered my brain.

I was in a fortress far to the north where the kingdom's eyes, let alone the empire's, did not reach. It is a harsh land where people often die in blizzards while traveling on the road, their corpses buried under the snow.

It meant that none would know if a single imperial dog died here.

Bury his corpse in the snowfields, and the northern blizzards would remove any trace of it. Even more thorough would be to take the dead Marquis far into the mountains, where the monsters would gobble him up without even leaving a bit of bone. Even if questions came later, it would be easy to say that his fate was unknown.

Whether by a blizzard or a group of orcs that had not been killed, many excuses existed to cover up his murder.

I started to ponder upon such things in all sincerity.

“Hmmm,” I muttered as I thought whether I would slit his throat then and there, but a ranger sent me a discreet hand signal.

‘Soon, After, Arrival, Three, Cavalry.’

I frowned when I interpreted his meaning. He had told me that the shrewd Marquis had made sure that everyone knew where he was before he stepped into my hall. The ranger discreetly asked me if he had to send men out to kill the cavalrymen.

I wondered at their chances: seventy percent in fair weather but only twenty percent if a snowstorm blew in.

I concluded that the risks were too high for me to strike the head off of this dog of the empire.

Still, the harm this man had done to the north was too great, but for the time being, it seemed that the Marquis’ neck would remain firmly affixed to his shoulders.

I knew the day would come for him to pay for the blood he had spilled and pay for it dearly.

“Your Highness?” the Marquis asked, not knowing how close he had come to dying. He stared at me with that abominable face of his.

The Marquis of Montpellier wriggled his eyebrows at me.

“You won’t find us to be hospitable,” I told him.

He was polite to the best of his abilities, yet it seemed whatever the plan that he had, had been foiled by sternness, so he swiftly changed his expression into a smirk as he changed his tact.

“Ah, but at a time, you and I had tried to do great things! It is difficult if you remain so sad.”

I had almost expelled him, but I stiffened at his words.

“Great things?”

The Marquis gave me a sly glance and a nod that clearly showed he wanted to discuss something in private.

“Leave us,” I told the rangers and the messengers.

Only the Marquis and I were left.

“What great things are we planning together?”

“Ah, and you pretend not to know of them!” the Marquis stated, and his face had become quite grim.

“No. I really don’t know.”

“Oh my lord, it’s difficult if you do things like this. I have come from afar, and I came here in good faith.”

I stared at the Marquis, and as I did, his face took on a severe expression.

“So you, First Prince, after gaining the fair reputation of, ah, of Savior of the North, do you still desire to be only a prince? Heh?” the Marquis asked me, a tone of threat creeping into his voice. “Hoho, don’t be mistaken! Just because you got a little fame here does not mean the corruption, the filth, can be washed from your body, oh no!”

I instinctively knew that this body’s previous owner had done something that had spiraled out of his control. The problem was, I could not figure out what it is that Adrian had done. Fortunately, there was someone eager to furnish me with an answer.

“Yes, you, you are the trash that sold your own country’s knights, yes? If these northmen knew about your past, do you think that they will follow you, these honest men?” the Marquis said, revealing the true color of things and answering my question before I had even asked it.

“Yes, this castle you have built in the north, it is only a sand castle! It will collapse under a single wave. If they knew you were a spy, an informant, a traitor, would they

stand behind you as they do now?"

"What exactly did I do?"

"Hoh! You don't even know how to be ashamed. 'Please tell me', you ask. For you, it was a sin, but for me, a great achievement! There is nothing of it that I cannot tell you!" the Marquis spat out, his contempt for me plain.

So I listened to him. The Leonberger family had prepared secret troops over many generations, and their training and arming had come at astronomical costs and manpower. Adrian Leonberger had betrayed these troops' presence to the empire and had even made sure that the three leading knights had their rings broken so that they could not inform on him, on the traitor that had been appointed as their master.

"Oho, those men were truly loyal, and if they had been born in our empire, we would have used them openly! Ah, they must have been sorry to meet with you, such an unscrupulous master," the Marquis of Montpellier said, clearly having fun at my expense with his expository explanations.

I tightly closed my eyes: Knights who had denied their monarch with bloody tears, some who had insulted those who had pledged themselves to the lords of the empire, and others still that had become part of the warrior mother's faction. And, among them all, a king who could do nothing but watch as all the walls around him crumbled into dust.

I pictured these terrible scenes in my mind as if I had seen them with my own eyes.

My head was spinning.

I knew Adrian was a fool, yet I had been confident that the evil deeds of his past could not surprise me.

That has proved to be an illusion – the First Prince was a greater piece of shit than I had thought possible.

To think that he had sold out the secret knighthood of his own family to the greatest enemy of the kingdom!

Well, now, I knew.

I had always wondered at the true reason for the king's hateful gazes and cold treatment of me. His actions, his abandonment of his eldest son, had never been an excessive response. I have now learned the original sin of this idiotic prince, and I now found it incomprehensible that the king had even allowed such a pest, such a cockroach of a man, to continue to live.

I would have beaten Adrian a hundred times; a thousand times! I would have torn him into thousands of little fleshy bits until not a trace of his body remained.

"Hmmm, I think I remember now," I stated plainly to the Marquis of Montpellier, and he shuddered when he looked into my face.

"Yes! You are only alive because of my empire, it did not want your death. And you know if we do not support you, you can never be the king."

Everything was exactly as the Marquis had described it. The king would never allow his eldest son, who had sold out the kingdom's knights, to ascend the throne.

"Hoh, but don't worry, Your Highness!" the Marquis said, his expression guarded. "That is why I have come here, to you."

He was staring straight into my eyes now.

"I will make you the king."

It was absurd, and I found it unreasonable to listen to a foreigner talk about the throne as if it was already in my grasp.

However, the irrational actions had been done by that chubby idiot of a prince, not the Marquis of Montpellier.

No, the Marquis was just making his small contribution to ensure that a puppet did not escape the web that it had fallen into.

"What are the conditions of your offer, then?" I asked, my curiosity piqued.

"It is just okay if you do what I ask, sometimes. Other than that, well, you can enjoy all the pleasures and all the powers that a king can wield."

The Marquis already talked as if we were in the same boat. His face was one that

firmly believed that his little royal informant would never be able to reject him.

And he was right.

If you have committed such a sin and succumbed to such utter weakness, wouldn't you pretend to die if you didn't just kill yourself outright?

"What happened to the knights whose rings were broken?" I demanded.

"Huh? Oh, I didn't kill them, I did not have to! Rather, it is a burden for the king if they are just alive."

I gave a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad, then I still have a chance to make up," I said as I looked at the Marquis. He frowned at me, clearly not understanding what I meant.

"Do you have a list of them and their locations?"

"Surely, but why-"

"It's uncomfortable to leave things as they are."

The Marquis stretched his eyes wide and quickly burst into laughter.

"Hoh, you are more thorough than I thought!"

"I'm a bit like that, yes," I said as I laughed along with the Marquis of Montpellier.

* * *

The Marquis was helping out where he could, saying that the advance payment I would receive for sharing the secret was on its way to Winter Castle.

"So, let me use it well."

I saw no reason to refuse such funds.

"Then, Your Highness, I hope to see you in good form soon in the royal palace," the Marquis said as he bowed down to me, acting extremely friendly.

“Then, you will be free!”

I once more laughed along with the Marquis.

“Be careful on your journey, Marquis. Some of the orcs who have crossed the mountains are still alive and wandering.”

“Hoh… have you ever seen such ugly things? But Your Highness and the brave northern soldiers are working so hard day and night, these things, they will be wiped out in no time.”

“I sure hope so, Marquis,” I said as I saw him off.

“You!” I called to Gunn as soon as the Marquis was well on his way. She appeared silently at my side, and I gave her my orders. She nodded and led away a few of her fellow elves. After Gunn had disappeared, I called Antoine to me.

“Your Highness, I came as soon as I heard your summons,” the captain of the Silver Foxes said as he came to me.

I handed an envelope to Antoine, and he cringed more than was necessary.

“Antoine, find all the people on that list and bring them to me.”

“You mean all?”

“Not a single one must be missing.”

“There are so many people on here!” he said after studying the list for a while. “It will take some time to track them all down.”

“I don’t care, just make sure you remain discreet.”

“If there is nothing else,” Antoine said as he bowed to me in an exaggerated fashion and then left.

My eyes briefly wandered in the direction that the Marquis of Montpellier had left in, and then I made my way to the castle proper.

* * *

The Marquis of Montpellier went into the winter with a light heart and a spring in his step.

His journey had been worth the entire slog to this barbaric land, as he had been able to put the leash around that mad dog, the First Prince Adrian.

“Ah, this should be enough.”

Since the First Prince was already well organized, the Marquis could say that he had a rough plan to defend the north in the person of Adrian. If censure faced him in his home country, he knew that his efforts here would make an excellent example of his continued efficacy as ambassador.

He knew that if he handled this crisis well, he would be opening a broad path into the future.

He had planned things just right so that the number one enemy of the royal family was squarely beneath imperial control, so the future held little worry.

Immediately after his return, he knew that he would orchestrate the removal of key nobles and shove the First Prince onto the stage. Night soon descended as the Marquis of Montpellier fell asleep in his carriage while making plans and creating schemes.

When he woke up, the world had changed.

Everything around him was dark; he couldn’t see a thing and could not move a single inch of his body.

He tried to shout for help but found that some unknown object had been jammed into his mouth.

All the Marquis of Montpellier could do was wiggle his toes and drool in fear.

What the hell is this affront to a servant of the empire?

He didn’t understand what the cause of his predicament was.

He knew that the atmosphere in the north was volatile after the war, with bandits and peasants at times daring to attack the carriages of nobles.

Yet, if bandits had attacked him, then surely his escort of knights would have torn through the braggarts.

Then, have I been captured by those ugly orcs?

No, he decided that made even less sense. If those monsters, who acted only on instinct, had attacked him, he would surely already be dead.

He rolled the scenario time after time through his scheming mind, yet no answer came.

Even more perplexing was the constant smell of fresh grass; it did not suit the northern winter at all.

He did not even know for how long he had been hogtied, for there was no way by which he could tell the time.

And then the blindfold that covered his eyes was ripped away.

Torchlight punched into his eyes, forcing his pupils to shrink, yet he could recognize the familiar face before him.

“Hmmeeehupphhmmu!” he said to that face.

“Oh, I forgot to loosen the gag.”

In the next moment, the person’s hand roughly removed the bunched-up cloth that had been shoved into the Marquis’ mouth.

The Marquis of Montpellier spat and raised his head in disgust.

The grotesque human before him was none other than Prince Adrian.

“What is this!? Why do you take me so!?”

The First Prince only laughed at the Marquis’ angry shouts.

“Not my plan at first, I tried to be patient with you,” Adrian said, still laughing, and yet his laughter was strangely eerie.

“But see here, my dear Marquis of Montpellier, you just keep on giving me reasons to kill you!”

“What? Do you think you’ll be safe from the empire if you do this? We, the only ones that can protect you?”

“I don’t know, but look at yourself, Marquis! You couldn’t even keep yourself safe, not from my fine friends, at least.”

At the words of the First Prince, the Marquis took in his surroundings.

Ghosts in green cloaks were standing about, and they were the only thing he could see other than the infinite expanse of the pure white of a snowfield.

The Marquis was terrified.

“Well, Your Highness, you must face reality! You can fix your shame if I return alive, for I am able to bear these small grudges. And if I do not support you, Your Highness, you can never ascend to the throne. The king, he will not allow the royal traitor who had broken his aspirations to succeed him, now will he?” the Marquis asked, and he believed every word of what he said.

“Right, right, the informant cannot become the king,” the First Prince said, expressing his deepest sympathy for the Marquis’ viewpoint.

“Yes! So then if you free me, even now, it will be poss-“

“But I can be king,” Adrian interjected before the gorgeous Marquis could even finish his attempt at sibilant persuasion.

“I have already toppled one king, my dear Montpellier,” the First prince added, his voice determined, and his face full of confidence.

All the Marquis managed to do then was to tremble in fear and beg for his life while lying flat in the snow.

CHAPTER 81
THE WISE MEN WHO CHOOSE ETERNITY, NOT ETERNITY (1)

Usually, those who are on the verge of death show one of two patterns of behavior: They accept their fate and mutely give up, or they struggle to the last minute, to the last second for survival.

The Marquis of Montpellier was one of the latter men.

He crawled to me and fell before my feet, even after the swords-elves had cut great gashes into him.

“Aaah, well… Your Highness, Your Highness… Please, spare me, just spare my life!”

The Marquis continued his desperate pleas, his mind by now addled by the attention the elves had already furnished onto him.

“If you only let me live, I… I shall become Your Highness’s dog! If you bark, I will bark and… if you die, I’ll pretend to die!”

Here he was, such a miserable creature who had such a strong attachment to life.

He had said that he would bark if I barked but wasn’t even willing to lie and say he would offer his life to save mine!

“Gaju is the ancestor of the Ghurn family, and that Countess of his, she talks with my government. And the eldest son of the Baltes family, from the central region, he likes to talk with the wives of imperial vassals.”

And all of a sudden, the Marquis of Montpellier started to spill out all the dirty little secrets and private affairs of the nobility.

“And I know a lot more! I have evidence of corruption committed by so many nobles! If you only let me live, I will furnish Your Highness with all my information. With it,

you can punish, threaten, blackmail and coerce all the nobles would dare disobey Your Highness's orders!"

I understood now why and just how broadly he had moved among the nobles of the kingdom.

"Please, please have mercy on me! Then, I will become Your Highness's dog!"

The Marquis was clinging to my feet. I stared at him, then slapped his hands away as if removing dirt from my boots.

I looked across that vast snowfield, upon which the first rays of dawn were already shining.

I had spent the night watching the Marquis suffer, but it hadn't been as exciting as I had hoped it would be.

After all, my current troubles were too complex to be solved by the capture and culling of an imperial dog. The blood of the north's dead could only be repaid in an equal spilling of blood, dram by accursed dram.

We had a long way to go, and one's man's death was of little consequence in paying the blood debt.

I stood from my seat and glanced at Gunn.

Her alabaster white skin was covered in blood, and she approached me with an expressionless face.

The sound of her footsteps falling in the snow reached the Marquis' ears, and he knew what they meant.

"Your Highness! I will shut my eyes and ears from the empire! And much of what the kingdom has lost will come to your hands, I promise this!"

Gunn grabbed the Marquis by his hair and bared his throat.

"A billion! A billion!"

Gunn's sword touched the skin on his throat.

“Maybe… Ah! We can unseal the tower! Yes!”

The final defeat that was in the man’s voice raised my hand, and Gunn removed her blade. A thin trickle of blood dripped from the throat of the Marquis of Montpellier.

“Break the seal on a tower?”

“Yes! It means that with my authority as ambassador, I can allow the training of wizards and the re-opening of the tower. All of it had been restricted under the treaty.”

The Marquis hung his head in shame after having thrown out this final lifeline.

“Tell me more,” I said as I sat down again, watching the Marquis most intently.

“Hah! First of all, I must explain what the treaty is.”

* * *

As the explanation of the Marquis carried on, I could feel the muscles of my face stiffen.

What he described was not a treaty; it sounded more like the terms of surrender.

Not one of the sections had a single article that was beneficial to the kingdom.

No, what the treaty said in effect was that ‘I will sever all my own limbs and become your dependent.’

Even a lunatic would think twice before doing something that drastic.

The kingdom had to gain the empire’s permission whenever it wanted to train new troops and even knights.

The number of knights in the kingdom could not exceed a certain number, and the kingdom had to furnish the empire with a list naming each and every single knight. The list had to include their proficiencies and all other relevant details.

There could be no omissions, which in itself was a nonsensical clause.

However, there was a still more humiliating and disastrous provision.

While the knights and soldiers were still allowed to train, all wizardry was banned. In essence, the formation of wizards and the use of their tower was illegal.

The tower door had been sealed, and no magical research could be conducted. Improvements and training in war magic were prohibited, and only the healing magic could be taught.

Unless the person was a total idiot, no one would choose a wizard's career in such a restrictive work environment.

Moreover, wizards are the exact opposite of idiots; no, they are a tribe of humans whose brains rotate rapidly.

Surely such extraordinary and gifted individuals must have departed the kingdom for places that were more welcoming to the study and training of the magical arts.

I had always wondered why no wizards had aided us in the northern war, and now I knew: It was not that they had failed to participate, but rather that they were absent entirely.

"Hahaha ha ha!" I could do nothing but laugh, for this kingdom was not even a country in its own right.

It had long since lost its sovereignty and had become an imperial vassal. It would not be strange at all to call it another province of the empire.

Everyone but me in the kingdom had known this as fact.

I studied the Marquis of Montpellier, then. How absurdly dazzling the fact that this little man, his skin now bleeding from a profusion of cuts, had been the hound-master that had kept so many royal dogs on the leash!

He seemed to notice that my general political knowledge was severely lacking.

"I cannot utterly strike the clause from the treaty, but it is possible to loosen the constraints to some extent. As you know, the recent damages the north has suffered are great indeed," he quickly stated, his face pale.

“And that is thanks to whose actions?”

His face became more desperate by degrees of magnitude.

“We can temporarily allow the limited training and research of war magic, and lift the seals of the tower to at least its third floor.”

I learned that the tower was not a simple building.

It was a great spired pagoda constructed by wise men of yore that had accumulated the many mysteries of the world in their minds, and their tower so became a gateway to those secret sciences.

And each level of the tower represented an increase in the complexity of the lore and gadgets contained therein, meaning that a release on the third floor’s seal would allow the study and application of magic corresponding to the third level of mystery.

It was a tempting offer, except for the fact that a foreign ambassador was making it. Still, the proposal was enticing.

So what should I do?

The Kingdom of the Dead, which the empire had made over four-hundred years ago, no longer existed. The present Leonberg kingdom was a small country that could be blown away if the empire gave a big cough.

First off, I knew that my first priority was to buy myself some time.

“There are many things I can do besides that,” the Marquis stammered.

Even if he looked relatively calm on his exterior, I could see that the depths of his soul scratched at his heart, as if he was a man in the shadow of the gallows. I was worried.

It was a simple matter to cut the ambassador’s throat and be done with it. I could pull out Twilight and end the cowering man in a heartbeat.

However brief such an expression of my hatred would be, its aftermath would cause a political storm of terrible magnitude.

I would have cut the Marquis' throat without a second thought had I still been unaware of the treaty's existence.

Now that I knew the true state of affairs, a great investigation into the north by imperial officials would most definitely be conducted if I killed the man. Every action that I had planned and would plan was expressly forbidden in the treaty.

Organize your thoughts and reach a decision.

"Very well. It wouldn't be a bad thing, raising at least one imperial dog in my kennels."

The Marquis fell in love with my words, for he so loved his life.

When faced with certain death, he didn't seem to care about his pride or honor at all. Or maybe he figured that he would get his revenge on me, so he was willing to do anything to escape his current predicament.

"You will never regret this!"

To my ears, it sounded as if he was saying that he would ensure that I would regret my actions.

"By the way," I said after he had exhaled in relief and stared up to me, "If you want to be a dog, then lie down like one! Heel boy, heel!"

The Marquis of Montpellier fell flat to his face, burying it in the snow as he prostrated himself before me. His body trembled, his ass in the air, and I could hear that he was having trouble breathing.

I laughed at his pathetic display of subservience. All that remained was to put a leash around the nasty little dog's neck, and I just so happened to have a suitable leash for the likes of him.

At that very moment, I activated [Poetry of Domination] and channeled the usurper's powers from the depths of my soul to strengthen the effect.

"Swear that your master is me, not the Emperor of Burgundy."

"Hah, I swear that my master is not the emperor, but His Highness and soon to be

Majesty, Prince Adrian Leonberger."

The Marquis was somewhat unaware of what he was doing and what I had done to him.

"I swear before all those present that from now on into eternity, my destiny rests in your hands."

When I heard him adding words that I had not told him to say, it seemed as if his surrender was complete.

However, the human mind is a subtle machine and difficult to corner. I knew that it was impossible to fully convert him to my service, no matter how hard I struck him with [Poetry of Domination]. In time he would forget his oath, and only the shame of this morning would remain in his memory.

Even if such a day came, though, the Marquis had left his mark on our little contract and could not dare overturn his oath.

He had betrayed his emperor and had sworn a blood oath before me. He now had to furnish me with imperial secrets and information that should not fall into the hands of enemies of the empire. On top of all that, the contract he had written in his own blood on a piece of parchment had even been stamped by the Montpellier family seal!

"Uh? Huh!?" he stammered as he saw the book of blood that he had written of his own volition. He knew that something had gone terribly wrong, even with his mind in tatters and his will conquered. I then rolled his oath up, inserted it into a cylinder, and hung it on a thin chain around my neck.

"Hoh, I got hurt a lot," the Marquis muttered.

"That's why I warned you to be careful, the north is a dangerous place."

He rolled his eyes at this, the last display of his prodigious wit.

I dragged the Marquis of Montpelier with me to Winter Castle.

"Your Highness?" Count Balahard asked. The return of the Marquis angered him and his commanders. I just gave them a rough answer when they asked me why the man

was still here.

“I had been attacked by the Orcs,” came the ambassador’s mumbled response.

The expressions of those around us became strange upon his words. These men had been fighting orcs all their lives, so they could see the absurdity of his statement. The difference between the wounds inflicted by orcs and the wounds inflicted by elves was a clear one.

“I don’t know what kind of orc, but he’s surely a guy who’s learned how to cut right and proper,” a knight said as he admired the wounds on the Marquis’ body. In his eyes, though, it showed clearly that the knight knew who had applied such cuts in the man’s flesh.

I had expected such cognizance from the knights.

I left the Marquis in the care of healers and then returned to my lodge. Vincent was waiting in my rooms.

“What the hell happened?” he asked me. Instead of answering him, I showed him the bloody contract signed and stamped by the imperial ambassador.

Vincents’s eyes stretched as if they were being torn from their sockets upon seeing the document.

“Think carefully about what we need to know, Vincent. Think about what you had been unable to do since the imperial treaty.”

Count Balahard’s face was filled with such utter disbelief that I could only laugh.

* * *

We had plenty of time to figure out what we needed to be done.

The Marquis of Montpellier had suffered from multiple cuts under the elven blades, and the greatest had been the blow to his heart. He had suffered even more upon his return to Winter Castle. It was only fifteen days later that he could travel, and so he left the fortress in great haste, escorted by the Silver Foxes that I had attached to him.

“It must have come from the tower,” I said. The Marquis had by then reached the capital, and he had sent an item to me.

It was a crystal ball mounted on a golden pedestal, inset with a great variety of glittering jewels. At first glance, the object looked completely useless; its only purpose was surely the decoration of a tabletop. Yet, it had a function that I could not have guessed.

It surprised me greatly to learn that the crystal ball was an artifact that enabled communication over vast distances between its central node in the capital and its extension, which was now in my possession.

“Well, centuries have passed, so I guess it’s normal if the fields of communication have been further developed through wizardry.”

I was more than happy to activate the crystal ball, and the method to do so was quite simple.

I merely had to inject a sliver of mana into the device to establish the connection.

“Your Highness,” the Marquis spoke from the sphere.

“Five fingers! Put your hand on the crystal ball and speak,” came the tinny sound of his voice, a voice that I didn’t want to hear.

“Like this?”

“Indeed! You are very good.”

As I listened to the voice of the cunning Marquis, I studied the various aspects of the crystal ball. I didn’t enjoy its presence overmuch, as it was a blatant symbol of the empire’s greed and the kingdom’s weakness.

If this crystal ball had existed in the previous wars, it would have been possible to lessen the damage.

“It’s not a common device, even in the empire,” the Marquis said in excuse, obviously having heard and correctly interpreted my sigh.

“Not many of them exist at all, but this set had been given to me in the event of

emergencies, for it is a most useful tool for the intrepid ambassador, yes? Anyway, Your Highness, I had sent my requests to the mainland for the removal of the seals and the training of wizards, and I had received a positive response."

"Good, good. Anything else to report?"

Before the Marquis had left, I had asked him for one more thing other than the removal of seals and commencement of training.

"They have also approved the request for the construction of a new tower in the north."

I had known that even if the original tower were unsealed, the north would not directly benefit. I had asked the Marquis to arrange for the construction of a northern tower and the permission for it to hold mysteries up to the third and fourth levels. He had succeeded.

"Hoh, but can the kingdom's current economy bear the costs required for the design and construction of the tower? As Your Highness knows, the reality is that there aren't really architects and wizards in the north."

"No need to worry yourself."

"Aha, but Your Highness, a tower is a complex thing, and even the wizards of the empire can only rely on ancient texts to replicate such constructions. Also, if you create a Spire, a Senior Wizard must reside within and manage it. Without aid from the mainland, the kingdom can neither maintain nor construct such a thing. You also need someone to train wizards…"

The Marquis spoke on, repeating himself a few times, so I stopped listening.

I knew the perfect person who could manage a Spire after its erection and even manage the construction itself through their understanding of ancient lore.

CHAPTER 82
THE WISE MEN WHO CHOOSE ETERNITY, NOT ETERNITY (2)

“Where can you find such a man in the kingdom, hm?” the Marquis of Montpellier asked in a stern voice. He went on to express his deep concern, saying that if such a person suddenly came to the fore, it would be seen as evidence that the kingdom had violated the treaty and secretly trained sorcerers capable of erecting and maintaining towers.

He was just spewing a lot of hot air, for he had been assigned to watch over the kingdom, and if such a person existed, then he would be rebuked by his imperial masters for negligence.

“Elf,” I said into the sphere, giving the man a reasonable excuse to furnish upon his handlers. “My fiancé is one of the best wizards in her tribe.”

I had never imagined that I would willingly call the mad elf that, and I felt terrible as the words left my tongue.

But I had little choice, so I had closed my eyes and reinforced the public nature of my relationship with Sigrun.

She was far more of a magical swords-elf than a wizard, and elves who independently studied the mysteries of the universe were not attached to towers, but none of that was important.

The truth mattered little now; no, all that mattered is what I could make others believe the truth to be.

The Marquis had objected in no way to the explanations I had provided, so I mentioned the next task at hand. The state of the royal treasury and the kingdom’s decrepit economy was a problem, as well as the stubborn king who still ruled.

Regardless of whether the kingdom could afford the erection of a Spire, the king

would never allow one to be built in the far north, beyond his sphere of influence.

In all likelihood, he would vehemently insist on building it near the capital, and if it is built there, it would be a good bet that not a single wizard would ever be sent north.

That was not what I wanted at all.

Just as the king would not want a Spire under my influence, I had no intention of sharing a Spire with the kingdom.

All I wished for was a complete tower in the north. Even if it was only up to the third level, a wizard tower remains a wizard tower.

Still, even if the northern nobles all pitched in to cover the cost, I wondered whether it would be enough.

“Where is the money that northern nobles got from those in your central kingdom, hm?” the Marquis asked as if having read my thoughts.

“Even if they still have it, you cannot afford the construction of a Spire,” he added firmly.

I wondered what I would do to get that amount of gold, which made me a little worried.

“I don’t know, if you can pay that big amount of money on your own? You have to receive it from nobles.”

How many nobles would willingly part with their coin?

“I have told you their secrets, no? Use that information, use their weakness. That is what you must do.”

The voice from within the crystal sphere had grown silent. I could see the sheepish expression of the Marquis in the back of my mind.

I could not even start to imagine how I would intimidate the nobles of this country and rob them of their wealth.

They were a nest of serpents who would sell their own kingdom, their own mothers

if they judged it necessary, and their brains were only wired toward self-interest.

Simply put, there was not a smidgen of loyalty to be found in their hearts.

“The originality of my plan, it is great.”

“I like it, let’s do it.”

“Your Highness?”

“You wanted to uphold my interests, act in my name?”

The Marquis didn’t answer. He knew well that I was trying to establish the name of Adrian Leonberger as ruler of the north, even if that wasn’t my name. The blatant blackmail and impoverishment of nobles would be a big deal for the empire’s ambassador, as ripping off so many people would create discord within the kingdom.

“I’ll give you some parting advice, Marquis.”

“I am listening.”

“If you choose to be a dog, then be a dog down to your bones.”

No answer came from the man beyond the crystal sphere.

“Because, if you try to bite the hand that feeds you, both your former and current owner might just throw you into the gutter.”

“I… I will keep that in mind, Your Highness.”

“And just before you get any ideas, don’t even think of cutting into my share. And if you rob these people, do it thoroughly, don’t assume that I don’t have my eyes watching your mangy arse.”

I did not even tell him what would happen if he betrayed me; I just infused my voice with the power of my soul.

I didn’t know if magical energies could be felt through the crystal sphere, but I sure as hell hoped so.

“I will keep it all in mind, Your Highness.”

As I heard the trembling timbre of his voice, I knew my magical intimidation had struck home.

“Okay, very good.”

I laughed happily after so easily solving the matter of financing the Spire.

* * *

The fluctuating mana slowly dissipated, and I took a long breath before opening my eyes.

“It’s not simple.”

The impressions had been engraved without my knowledge.

Through my battle with the Warlord, I obtained the [Heroic] poem I had hoped for and achieved a growth of my soul worthy of that poem.

It was now exactly three months that I had claimed my place as a hero by transcending even the extraordinary.

However, I did not expect any exceptional levels of growth in the near future.

This damnable body was the problem; its fleshy prison was holding me by the ankle.

I had, up to now, bared my soul whenever necessary and marshaled the powers of Muhunshi so that I could endure as much as possible, yet I had reached my limits. My Mana Response was only on a normal level at the moment. For this reason, I had forcibly developed my body’s talents through dance poetry, but I still had to sigh at how dull Adrian’s corporeal vessel was.

Due to the inadequacy of his flesh, I was unable to take a single step toward the wall of becoming a Sword Master.

It was the cruel truth of nature.

One does not become a Sword Master just by accumulating a lot of mana, and one

does not simply become one by gaining enlightenment.

The Sword Master could only be called as such if his body, soul, and mana were all in harmony, even if their development has reached completion.

The only thing I possessed that met the requirements of becoming a Sword Master was my soul.

Both the mana and the physical state of this body were a crime against nature. The vessel was far too small for what I wanted to stuff into it.

There was only one way to solve my quandary in a short time: I had to reconstruct this body.

However, such a reconstruction could only be supported by requisite talents and skills.

To rise to become a Sword Master, you need to rebuild your body, and to rebuild your body, you must rise to become a Sword Master.

The situation was the same, no matter the angle one viewed it from.

If things went on like this, Adelia would become a Sword Master before I did.

Contrary to me, her soul did not match her physical prowess. However, her enormous innate talents could overcome the disharmony and incompleteness in her being. By my estimate, she would soon become at least a half-swordmaster.

And it wasn't just her either, for Arwen continued to fight day by day and had already woven her third ring. Even now, she was patrolling in the mountains and growing at a rapid pace.

It was probable that Arwen would reach the rank of Sword Master before Adelia. That was one of the reasons that the people of this age preferred mana rings.

I did everything that I could, but I would be the last one to ascend if things went on like this.

I just hoped I would not be impatient and find a solution sooner rather than later – before that lunatic elf, that physical reincarnation of destruction and entropy,

revealed her true colors.

Before the greedy Burgundian empire realized what I was planning and before the rubbish nobles and the incompetent king completely destroyed their country.

Meanwhile, I just had to be patient to reach the level I wished to reach.

Of course, if I just waited, nothing would be accomplished. My body would never be completed, and I would be unable to face the things I had to deal with.

Some time ago, I received news that the royal family's secret knights would soon be brought to Winter Castle. Those that could not be persuaded to come have been forced here by more radical means. Most of the knights on Antoine's list were on their way.

I could not guess what thoughts raced through their minds when they first were told that they would be coming to Winter Castle, so some of them could be coming with swords in hand, or dragged here by the Silver Foxes.

There were many more things to do besides awaiting their arrival.

In order to further strengthen the defenses of the fortress, talented people were selected from the barracks and put into squads that were trained separately.

Senior mercenaries of the Silver Fox Company were also placed within these squads, with Bernardo Eli appointed as the overall training instructor.

He was both a strict teacher and a thoughtful commander, who knew when to punish and when to praise his soldiers, when to push them and when to let them rest.

I watched it all happily, knowing that he had proven his skills and the trust I had placed in him.

From the moment that I had seen him in that demeaning social club, I knew that he was not an idiot, unlike his fellow exiles.

His status screen had been a wonderful thing and showed that he was merely a young man frustrated by his family's fall and had so chosen the wrong path and the wrong friends. After the war was over, I had held a conversation with Bernardo.

“What is the reason you asked me to come to you before I was taken to the judge?”

“I wanted to hear your story. I wanted to know why the family that held the secret of mana hearts had fallen from grace.”

“Well, originally, the Eli men are famous for being stubborn. My grandfather and father were, so I just wanted to prove that the Elis were right, and not merely hardheaded.”

Through our conversation on that day, I had learned that the Eli family still believed in mana hearts and Muhunshi and that they had made countless attempts to overcome the Knights of the Rings.

Although they all failed, their failure became the fertilizer within the heart of a man named Bernardo, and that fertilizer was tilled into the soil from which the new knightly candidates in Winter Castle would blossom. I recalled another conversation.

“Why did you pretend to be mad?”

“It is because funds are needed to rebuild a completely ruined family.”

“Ah, but you caught Hogu, you grew some hair on your chest.”

“There are many noble words for water, and one must be as adaptable and calm as a stream.”

“So, am I also a water lord? Do I qualify?”

“Great water flows through you, yes.”

I could only laugh at Bernardo’s answer, for his brain became extraordinary when dealing with me.

“Well, I don’t understand why you pretended to be such an idiot all that time.”

I just kept on laughing instead of answering, so he puffed up his cheeks.

“I suffered under the king’s rage. All the assets I had struggled to collect were seized, with the officials saying that I had gained them through improper channels. I suffered a great loss.”

I had known then that Bernardo held me responsible for that.

“All the years of loyalty and service by the Eli family will be rewarded.”

Even while everyone had given up on the path of transcendence, the Eli knights had not, until the very end. The Bernardo I knew was just as hard as the winter boys, and I spoke more freely with him than with Arwen, who rarely even looked at me.

Regardless, the new training of troops had another goal at its heart: Members of the northern nobility had to serve as commissioned officers in Winter Castle for a time so that their families never forgot the truth of winter again.

The descendants of the Blood Lions were also growing their skills, so everything was proceeding smoothly.

I was prepared to leave Winter Castle without any regrets.

I left with three rangers to guide us, along with Arwen, Adelia, and Boris.

Then, we headed deep into the mountains, beyond the Blade’s Edge Mountains and into the Frost Mountains, where the land was primal and the winters far more ferocious and unbearable.

“From here on out, we know nothing of the lands beyond,” the rangers said as they bowed their heads, saying that it would be difficult for them to guide us further. I commended them for guiding us this far through the cold, not one of them possessing mana to keep themselves warm.

Then, I ordered them to head back. I had planned to let Boris guide us from there.

“Hmmm,” she mused as she glanced at me.

I was worried to an extent, me being out here with only female companions. Maybe it was the same old rumors, calling Adrian out for horniness, that bothered me. Arwen and Adelia wondered at my behavior as well, as I usually had some men accompanying me. They did not say anything, but I saw the question in their eyes.

I then explained to them my purpose for heading this deep beyond the Blade’s Edge Mountains. Their expressions hardened at once upon my explanation.

“Firstly, keep what I said in mind and try to follow my strategy even if things go awry,” I explained as we headed further into the Frost Mountains.

“Your Highness, how can you walk with such confidence?” Boris asked me. She seemed to be asking what we would do if we got lost.

“Have no worries,” I told her as we pressed on. “This is a place that I know.”

And I knew it, even if hundreds of years had passed, the rugged mountain peaks that unfolded before us were familiar to me as if I had seen them a day before. It is the path that Leonberger’s army took when they went to battle Gwangryong, and I spent a few months here during those battles.

What I sought now were signs of those who had been here before, so many centuries ago.

“Halt.” I approached the entrance to a large cave and looked around for a while, laughing under my breath.

“We have come to the right place.” The terrain was as I remembered it, and the differences that nature had wrought through the ages insignificant.

“I’m heading in alone, so wait here,” I told my companions as I stepped inside. After sifting through my memories and exploring the dark cavern for a while, I found what I was looking for.

“Ugh!” I heard someone utter her disgust as I left the cave. They were not disgusted at me, but rather at what I held.

In my hand was a black heart, still beating as black energy was sucked in and out of it, in and out like a cruel parody of lifeblood.

“I feel the sinister energy, as Your Highness has said,” Arwen said with a pale face. Her expression was one of caution as she looked at the heart absorb and expel dark energies.

I had come here for this, and not only because it was some bizarre object.

It was the last piece of his body that a wizard had left in the world, a wizard who had chosen eternal exploration over eternal rest, and this artifact of his flesh was a

promise of imperfect immortality.

It was the Millenium-old High Lich Life Vessel. I squeezed the heart in my hand, strong and hard until it looked like it would burst.

'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!' the echoing scream soon came, reverberating against the cliffs around us.

'How dare thee!'

Black energy took over the sky, and it seemed as if day had in a moment turned to utter night.

'You! You were with those guys!'

The black energy gathered into a single circle high up in the blue sky and rushed toward me.

"Yeah, it's been a long time," I said.

The blob of midnight came to float before me, slowly hardening, and then, a man stumbled from it, still wreathed in darkness.

"Our appearances may have changed drastically, but it is fortunate that we still have eyes to recognize one another," I told Smurmsmul as the night finally left him and revealed his features.

"Yes! Nice to meet you again," he said, all while I was grabbing onto the heart that looked as if it would burst at any moment.

"I greet you, white night's mage."

CHAPTER 83
THE WISE MEN WHO CHOOSE ETERNITY, NOT ETERNITY (3)

What I held in my hand was the heart of the darkness itself, and all the while, the dark blue sky and the great darkness that had covered it trembled.

“Look what I have here in my hand, and step out a bit further,” I said as I squeezed the organ that I held.

“Don’t do that, eeeh! Eeeeh! Eh eeh eh, you’ll just burst my heart!” came the begging scream from the mass of darkness.

“Ida hah heh, that language you speak! Jeh heh heh heh heh!”

I found this to be quite a tacky response after the prestigious entrance that had been made.

I smiled and beckoned at the floating blob of darkness. “Come down here at once, it hurts my throat to keep shouting, and it hurts my neck to keep looking up!”

The darkness lingered for a while and then descended to the earth.

‘Shiiink,’ came the sound as both Adelia and Arwen drew their blades out of instinct as the darkness neared us. Boris had been aiming her bow at the blob from the moment that it had materialized. Then came a great noise, and it seemed to shake the world, almost as if reality was having a seizure.

I knew that there was no possibility of a fight, for I held the Life Vessel firmly in my grasp. The darkness was merely studying me, now standing tall before us like the shadow of some great tree.

“Strange,” I said, and the darkness trembled as I spoke. “I think you have recognized me, so why are you still keeping to your shadows?”

There came no answer.

“Ah, so you’ll be pretentious to the very end? That’s it then,” I goaded and squeezed the heart in my hand once more.

“Ooohhhh… Ohhhhh! That’s enough!” screamed and begged the blob, and it at once shuddered and slowly began to fade until it had dissipated completely. The figure of a mage, still shrouded in darkness, was revealed before us. Under the deep chasm of its hood, one could see the gaunt features of its skull and the ominous glow of red eyes, and no face was visible in the darkness.

It was as if we stood before a star that had once shone so brightly in the sky but then had fallen into the deepest darkest night.

“It’s been a while, Ophelia.”

She was a white night mage who had fallen here four hundred years ago.

She sighed deeply. “Even though its bloody shell has changed, its nasty temper is still much the same.”

I laughed at the fluency and ancient accent of her language, and as I had expected, she had recognized my identity at once.

Not even an elder high elf who had lived for a millennium had been able to pierce the truth of my identity, and I knew that this was due to Ophelia’s [Mind Eye], a talent which she had been born with that allowed her to see into the true nature of things.

It was nice because I was so very glad that at least one person remembered me and had been able to recognize me.

It was far different than my meeting with that lunatic elf, for unlike Sigrun, Ophelia wanted nothing from me.

I laughed in joy as I considered such things.

“What is the purpose of all this?” Ophelia asked, terribly annoyed.

“Come with me, Ophelia.”

She sighed. “Well, you have found my life vessel, which means I don’t have much a choice in the matter. Really, you haven’t changed at all in four-hundred years.”

She lamented her fate again and again.

“It’s really ugly that I’ve become entangled with you once more. Last time didn’t work out well at all! And now you force me to move against my wishes… ah.”

“Well, Your Highness?” I heard someone ask, and I realized that Arwen and the others still had their weapons at the ready.

“You can sheath your swords!” They would have followed my orders under any other circumstance, but their entire beings rejected my words on this day. Given the common public rumors about liches, it wasn’t strange that they were so reluctant to stow their weapons.

A lich in the eyes of the common folk is the ultimate symbol of an evil wizard, a terrible monster that despises all things living.

That was not true at all.

A lich is just a wizard who has become suspended from death for a while so that they could complete the labors of their lives. After achieving what they had wished to achieve, most of them destroyed their tokens of immortality and returned to the dust and dirt of the world. Even if they were the dead who invaded the realm of the living, they would never harm anyone as they were still wise and beneficent hermetical wizards.

If a lich does harm the world, it’s not because it is a lich, but rather due to some original flaw in the wizard’s personality. Therefore it could be stated with some certainty that the commonly held rumors of liches and their evil ways were utter hogwash.

Just because something is colored black does not mean that darkness resides within its heart, and just because something is dark does not mean that it is evil. Still, even after so many hundreds of years, people judge a thing by its form rather than its essence.

I clucked my tongue and explained all of this to my companions, telling them that Ophelia was not evil even if her form appeared to be unpleasant. I went on to say

that under her hood and robes, she had possessed a body that had been idolized by all the kingdom's men when she was still alive, so treating her like a monster now would surely not be pleasant to her.

Arwen and the other two relented and stowed away their weapons. However, they did not once keep their hands far away from the hilts of their blades until we had left behind the Frost Mountains, and I could do nothing about that.

* * *

"From this point on, we enter the area that the rangers patrol," Boris told me when we left the Frost Mountains and ascended the first slope of the Blade's Edge Mountains. As she told me this, her gaze remained firmly fixed on Ophelia.

Maybe she was worried that the rangers would make a fuss upon seeing the lich, or maybe Boris just did not like the idea of a skeletal mage walking around. Ophelia did not respond to such scrutiny, she rather seemed lost in her own thoughts, and perhaps she had already prepared herself for resistance in some way that we could not discern.

The magic of a sorcerer who had followed the secret mechanisms of the universe up to the level that she had was as subtle as the footfalls of a master thief running along a wall at night.

"Loyalty!" came the call of rangers, and we met them on their patrol. "We heard that you had entered the Frost Mountains, so we are glad to see that you are safe," the lead ranger said with a happy face. I looked behind me without conscious thought and saw that Ophelia's skull could still be plainly glimpsed, yet the rangers did not respond to her revenant appearance at all.

"Uh… Fine job, men," I said and bade them goodbye. Even as we left them, I heard not a single word of surprise at the leech that walked with us. That situation was repeated many times as Boris led us, and we chanced upon patrol after patrol of rangers.

None of them so much as noticed Ophelia's existence, and the same thing happened when we arrived in Winter Castle. Not one person noticed her presence as we passed through the gate, passed by all the crowds in the courtyard, and entered the keep itself.

“I came because you asked me to come, so now please answer my questions,” Ophelia said, a bit fearfully, as I closed the door to my rooms.

We had not seen one another for some time, yet her directness was not strange at all. Wizards were generally beings of original thought, for they preferred to find answers on their own rather than asking others for the truth.

“The combination of your spirit and body is too tightly-wound to be considered instinctual, artificial,” Ophelia stated.

Wizards are beings who first think of thousands or tens of thousands of words that could be said before saying a single one.

“It’s also improbable that your case is one of reincarnation. What happened to you?”

Her first question was not about why I sought her out, but rather why I was no longer a sword. I explained my entire story to her, and she did not comment on it, storing the tale in her thoughts like any other morsel of data. I left it at that, for some aspects of my tale remained a mystery even to myself. I clapped my hands together and once more called Ophelia’s attention to me.

“You will fulfill your personal desire in your time,” I told her as she looked at me. “There is something you need to do here first.”

I then educated her on the kingdom’s political reality, its treaty with the empire, and my plans for constructing a Spire. She gave her own insights as we went along.

“Is it really necessary, to give it but three floors!?” came her somewhat erratic question. I once more told her of the exact details of the treaty and how the kingdom has little choice but to go along with it.

“Time is terrifying. To see the Shining Blade, once so bright become so dull,” Ophelia said, a wistful sorrow creeping into her voice.

I could not respond, and she continued.

“Or, did you pass into another, more human form, and in so doing, not see the true essence of things?”

Her sudden ridicule made me frown, yet I chose not to push her. I merely waited,

waiting for her to give me a convincing explanation for her musings.

“Just because it is called a tower doesn’t mean it really is, or has to be, a tower,” she said almost happily as she looked at me.

“It’s just a gateway to the mystery, to all the mysteries.”

As she said this, her fingers pointed to the ceiling and the unseen sky beyond, and then back to the floor.

“It is not even necessary to build a tower, to lay a single brick.”

The feeling that her words invoked in me opened my eyes to other possibilities.

“Third floor up, but seventh floor down?” I asked, and Ophelia’s skeletal jaw rattled as he laughed.

* * *

Ophelia decided to stay in my room for the while, and her stated reason was that she didn’t want to appear before others before the construction of the tower commenced in earnest.

I knew that she had never been a person who liked hanging around with people in her original life, and besides, I had no intention of exposing her at that point in time.

I knew her well, knowing her to belong to a class of person that was easily pleased and fed. Whenever I looked in on her, she was working day and night, drafting various plans for the Spire’s design with great excitement.

Four hundred years had passed, and she had changed little, yet that did not mean that she was easily handled or even easy to talk with.

She was a mage who had created six circles four centuries ago, and I could not figure out what great levels she had reached since then.

Ophelia might have become such a great mage that she had created seven or even eight circles. She was bound to her Life Vessel, and I knew if I treated it carelessly that she would find a way to plunge us both into utter destruction. I had to use it sparingly, then.

And while Ophelia fervently drew up the designs for the Spire, the Marquis of Montpellier was eagerly 'raising' the funds we needed for it in the capital.

"I have covered about half the costs," he told me, and I knew that while the royal treasury had not been touched, quite a few nobles had to dish out and pay from their personal reserves.

After some time, a few of the Silver Foxes, who had been sent out by me, returned. The secret knights of the royal family, who had been forced to break their rings due to Adrian's betrayal, came with the mercenaries.

They were a gaggle of twenty-one men, their hair tangled, and their clothes ragged and messy. They looked more like peasants than knights.

I frowned, for the smell of alcohol exuded from their bodies.

"Did you give them booze?" I demanded from one of the Silver Foxes, but before the mercenary could make his excuse, one of the knights made it for him.

"Hey! If I don't drink, huh, how can I face that face of yours!?" he shouted at me, his voice cracked and bursting with emotion.

His pronunciation was slurred and messy, yet the utter resentment contained therein was all too clear.

CHAPTER 84
NOBLES, PRINCES, KINGS, AND EMPIRES (1)

‘Szook!’

The Silver Foxes drew their blades, doing what they thought had to be done.

“How dare this man speak in this manner!”

One blade aimed itself at the man’s neck, yet he did not budge an inch even as a trickle of blood flowed down his throat.

His eyes stared at me as if they had been nailed in place.

“Get back, all of you!” The Silver Foxes tried to shout angrily, but before they could gain something from doing so, I pushed back the man who held the blade at the knight’s throat.

“I don’t have anything more to say to you, as you have no right to his life, and because you gave him the alcohol! So don’t make a fuss.”

What loyalty would these Silver Foxes, who are and had always been mercenaries, have for me anyway? They have committed many sins in their lives, so I cared little for them.

“That’s right, I gave them booze, Your Highness, but only enough so they could stave off the cold.”

“Really now?”

The Silver Foxes humbly apologized to me and sheathed their blades. I waved them away with my hands, and they fled as they saw my eyes.

I stared at the knights, and the man who had insulted had not once averted his gaze. Their anger and resentment would not last long, though.

The collective fire of their grudge simmered down, and all that remained were twenty pairs of eyes that had been made docile by their drunkenness, and the hatred in them faded away.

'Tchu,' I accidentally clucked my tongue because I believed that vengeful spirits would serve me better than helpless and defeated soldiers.

The single man who had insulted me had karma that was quite heavy. The man stared at his comrades in silence.

"Why…?" he asked – the very same man that had said he could only bear to see my face if he was drunk.

"You called us?" His drunken voice was filled with shame.

"What the fucking hell are you hoping for? Why call us together!?"

Anger had entered his voice.

"What the hell did you want to see, hah? What were you thinking? Why did you… why…"

As before, his anger did not last long. It seemed that the pyre of his wroth had no more wood to fuel it.

"What the hell did I call you for? Why are you here?" I asked him as I screamed into his face. "I can ask you guys the same thing!"

One by one, they stared at me, whether with despair, anger, or empty eyes.

"What kind of glory did you come seeking here?" I demanded, and a few of them muttered at my words. Yet, before their meaningless resentment could flare up again, I spoke.

"Did you come here for an apple? Then I'll do it, I'll give you an apple. I'm sorry, really. I sold you, men, to the empire! Because of me, you have become trash, thrown in a ditch, trodden upon and forgotten. I am so sorry about this."

When I looked back up, the men had stupid expressions on their faces.

“Do you have any wishes? If so, speak up now. I will grant anything that is within my power to grant.”

“We… We just…”

“Just what?”

“Just…”

In my frustration, I ended up unknowingly showing them the true nature of my heart.

“I’d rather not keep a knife under my pillow in fear of another man’s vengeance. If you came here, intent on sticking a knife into the back of the trash that had sold you and the kingdom out…”

I would not be surprised if they were planning this.

“Because of you, we have even lost the capability of gaining vengeance!”

Their eyes changed in an instant.

“You are a sinner who betrayed the future of the country. You are a sinner who so brutally ended the careers of three-hundred-and-twenty-three knights! You! You!”

Their eyes were shining darkly blue, and liveliness had entered their beings.

“You’re a piece of trash that should be king!”

“You mean to blame me for everything?”

“You are the one who sinned! Why is it that we were the ones treated and punished as sinners!?”

Unlike a while ago, the fires within them were now burning properly.

“If it weren’t for you, we would have stood at the forefront of the kingdom!”

I knew that, rather than fading away, the flames of wrath burn brighter with the passage of time.

“And you even look more human now, you snake!”

The men stared at me with lively eyes, yet I asked my questions, not worried in the least.

“So you can do nothing now, just because you had your rings broken? So, without mana, you are not knights?”

“Our entire lives…”

“Listen to me first!” I shouted with an icy tone at the man who dared to interrupt me.

“Are all those who are not knights, garbage? Are those who fight without mana, weak?”

The rangers of Winter Castle had sacrificed their lives against that large monster army, they had thrown themselves into the fray, and not one of them possessed a spark of magic. When their legs were severed, they crawled into battle. If they lost an arm, they held their daggers in their mouths until they reached the enemy. In those last moments of the battle, so many of them had plunged from the walls hugging orcs in death-grapples.

Just because mana had not seeped into their blood did not mean that their tears were not real and their value non-existent.

“Three hundred knights? That’s a lot. That’s a great power. But how many knights exist in the empire? Ten times that? More? Okay then, there’s no law that says a man can’t fight just because he has no mana! But you guys are just going lay down and say exactly that: That you cannot wield a sword because you have no mana! That your arms are weak because you have no magic!”

I was naturally incensed at their attitudes, so I pressed them further.

“You spout sophistry!” one of them cried, and they held on to the end.

“A knight has the function of a knight, and a soldier the function of a soldier! I never said the one is more valuable than the other.”

Even after my voice had overwhelmed him, the man still managed to criticize me.

“You don’t deserve to say that, or to do as you did and still live! Even if all the people in the world point their fingers at me, you are still the sinner!” the man cried out against the evil that had been done to him.

I was tied down by the original sin of the damned fool. As long as I existed in the body of Adrian Leonberger, these men were right: I was not entitled to scorn their helplessness, as Adrian had taken all that they had from them.

Regardless of such truths, I continued talking.

“I will ask again: What were you hoping for in coming here?”

“I didn’t want to come. I didn’t want to see your face.”

“Nevertheless, you are here.” I clapped my hands, and a door opened as if having awaited my gesture. Vincent and a few rangers and knights appeared from it. The broken knights had sensed trouble coming the moment that I had clapped my hands.

“Your Highness, are you okay?” asked Vincent as he glanced at me. I nodded and said, “Give them swords.”

“Your Highness!”

“I don’t want to say it twice.”

Upon my order, the rangers and knights unbuckled their swords and placed them on the floor.

“Don’t come in here until I call you.”

Vincent stared alternately at the men and me for a while. He then looked down and left us.

“I’ll give you a chance for revenge. Lift up your swords.”

The men stumbled forward in their haste as, one by one, they scooped the blades from the floor.

“Here I am, the sinner who broke your rings and betrayed the kingdom’s future! If things are left as they are, this sinner becomes king. Isn’t it terrible indeed?”

The murderous intent was evident in the men's eyes.

"Is there reason for you to hesitate?"

The men held their swords, looked at each other, and surrounded me.

One of them gritted his teeth and rushed in. I drove my fist without hesitation into the man's chest, and his liquor-soaked body was thrust back under such crude a blow. The man clutched his sides as he rolled around on the floor.

"I said I would give you a chance, I never said I would give you victory."

Upon my words, the other men readied their swords.

"Hyaaarh!" they roared and shouted as they rushed in all at once.

I beat them all. They rose several times to rush at me again, and each time I beat them back.

They stood again, and I beat them again and again and again.

* * *

The bloody man struggled to get up with all his strength. I watched him quietly and kicked him in his side whenever he almost got up, without fail.

"Keep down!"

The man crouched as he clutched his side and groaned in pain.

"Tcha, I'm so sorry," I said as I laughed at them.

"If only you had your mana rings!"

A man who was stretched out on the floor started to sob out his sorrow. It seemed as if he could no longer bear the fact that his greatest enemy had not only beaten him but was now so cruelly ridiculing him as well.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I looked at them.

“Can you only get revenge on me if you have mana?”

Not one of them answered me.

“Then, you don’t have to wait.”

The man before me stared at me in resentment.

“You can infuse mana into your swords again.”

“We are… I can’t make a ring again.”

“Is the only mana the mana of the rings?”

I drew Twilight as I asked this and let the mana flow into it. I showed the sword to all of them.

“I am not a knight of the ring either. It won’t be difficult for you to take revenge on me, even if you use the low-level technique of mercenaries. So come at me with your clenched hearts, and collect mana into them. That is, if you want to prevent the trash that had sold you and the kingdom out from becoming the king.”

For the first time since I met them, a truly manly light shone in their eyes. There was little kindness left.

“However, I have conditions,” I told them.

“If you’re saying we ought to fight for you, forget it!”

Before I had continued speaking, one of them had had already made his feelings all the more clear.

“I don’t want your oaths, or your service.”

How could I ever expect those who bore rightful grudges against my former self to fight for me?

“You will fight for the kingdom, not for me.”

“Put an end to your sophistry and your-“

“You will fight the enemy you had always wished to fight,” I interrupted the man who shouted at me so fiercely. “The empire is your enemy.”

The men who had so loudly been shouting and cursing at me now shut their mouths at once.

“I understand your need for revenge, so fight the empire! If you condemn me for my sins, condemn them as well!”

I looked at them and continued.

“Isn’t it really a matter of breaking one stone, or breaking three trillion?”

* * *

I called the rangers and had them escort the men from my presence. Vincent sighed as he took in the state of the blood-spattered room.

“Did you have to do this? There must have been a better way to bring them to our side over time.”

Vincent, whose faith in the kingdom had been shaken after the war with the orcs, had not been surprised at all when I told him the truth of Adrian’s past sins. All he did was express his concern that I was taking the most difficult road in the entire affair.

“Because of some stupid boy, they had lost their rings and become normal men. Vincent, would you have forgiven me if I had done it to you?”

He sighed and shook his head.

“The whole affair has gone too far to bring about a happy solution.”

When I had first seen the men, I had seen the emptiness of their souls through their eyes. Even the resentment and hatred in those eyes were just reflective reactions to my presence. The men had breathed, and while they lived, they were not truly alive. I had seen so many humans like them countless times through all the ages. Especially in the ages of war, there existed those with wounded, stolen, or shattered souls.

I had watched through the centuries, with some boredom, as such living husks had

come to ruin.

I had also known how to raise them up, to suggest a path for their wandering souls to take.

That was the only way to save an emptied soul, and I decided to become the beacon, a beacon of hate, for these men.

My sympathetic actions were not fair to me, for I had not committed the sin, yet it was karma that I had to bear as long I lived in Adrian's body.

I had found the answer to their predicament and solved things in my own way. The apology I had given for the sin that I had never committed had been nothing more than a needed deception woven from lies and hypocrisy.

I will never beg for understanding and forgiveness, seeking a state of peace. I would rather bear the resentment and hatred and elevate the knights to their original status and states.

They would never have to fight for me, yet I was determined to give these men, these men who had been utterly loyal until the moment that their rings had been broken, a place to stand and fight in their own right.

Even if the force that drove their arms and their hearts was their hatred for me, even if the swords that I put in their hands in the time of war might slice my throat in times of peace, until such a time, their blades would be at my side and pointed at our mutual enemies in the empire.

"Wouldn't it be too dangerous, though? If they really gain mana within their new hearts, wouldn't they turn against Your Highness? Aren't you worried about sharpening the swords of the finest men that the royal family could find?"

Vincent's words made sense. I had examined the men and their talents with [Judgment] and had learned why the royal family had recruited them. All of them possessed talents of a B-grade or higher, so they must have all possessed no less than three mana rings.

And now such men would accumulate mana in mana hearts, and with their driving force being their hatred of me.

“Three hundred knights are by no means a small number.”

In total, there would be three hundred knights rushing at me in hatred, their Aura Blades held out before them, revenge burning in their eyes.

Why must I fear such a thing? I had no reason to be scared, for it is what I had expected. Maybe this was because, even in the body of a human, I was still a sword. Vincent looked at me in silence and shook his head.

“I don’t know why Your Highness continues to blame yourself and invite such troubles.”

“After my cursed life, it seems to have become a habit of mine,” I said with a giggle and then a laugh.

Vincent gave another sigh.

* * *

The Silver Foxes appeared one by one from their missions, and each time they returned, they added a knife against my back.

They had brought three-hundred-and-six people in total.

All of the royal family’s secret knights were now gathered in Winter Castle, except for the seventeen whose whereabouts remained a mystery.

Not one of them did not bear a grudge against me, but it didn’t matter.

The path I had to take was not the path of the wise conciliator king, but the path of the tyrant.

Rivers of blood had to flow until I had restored this decayed kingdom.

There would be a great deal more resentment and hatred heaped upon my shoulders before my duty was done.

What importance did the hidden knives of three-hundred-and-six knights make?

I had passed onto them my superior form of mana heart without any hesitation.

I passed onto them the mana hearts of those ancient guardian knights of the Leonbergers. I found it funny, for the sword that had once protected the veins of the Leonbergers had now become the sword aiming squarely at the heart of a Leonberger.

Yet, the enthusiasm and talents of these knights had never been in doubt. They were taught the mysteries and the breathing methods, and soon enough, each and every one of them had succeeded in forming a mana heart in their bodies.

“Fucking talented knights,” I swore, for I could not help but be a little bitter. While I was shoring up my power bit by bit in the north, the Marquis of Montpellier contacted me.

“All preparations are complete.”

My heart started pounding in my chest.

“Come and get what Your Highness deserves.”

The time had come for me to return to the capital, to the royal palace, which I had left like an exile.

CHAPTER 85
NOBLES, PRINCES, KINGS, AND EMPIRES (2)

“Servant!” shouted Gwain. “Bring me a drink!”

He slammed the table as he shouted, but neither the barmaid, who was cleaning tables nor the owner, who counted coin in a corner, pretended to see him. It was because the drunk Gwain’s brutality was not a new thing; he acted like this on a daily basis.

Damn… I wasn’t always… always like this.

Gwain loudly breathed as he lay his head on the table. He hadn’t been such a boring and boorish man years ago. He had held a sword in the name of the king, and his heart had been filled with a proud mission. Although his body had hidden away in an abandoned fortress, he had never forgotten his spirit and the truth that beat in his heart.

It had been a time of waiting and waiting for the glorious day that had been promised, a day of the great world that was to come.

He now knew all too well that what waited for him was not golden glory but deep, dark despair.

One day, the king had come to the abandoned fortress, and the king was not alone, for two handsome boys rode beside him.

The king had said that he might not be able to bring about a new grand order in his life, so he would prepare his sons for the future, for they were, after all, the next generation of the royal family.

His damned chubby face… and those curious eyes! More like the queen than his father.

The one boy didn’t seem so active, yet seemed adorable enough as children tend to seem. He was unlike his younger brother, for his eyes shone so differently. The first

impression of the first prince was that he was a perfectly normal boy – but that ordinary boy had cut asunder a hundred years of planning done by the kingdom. Every three months, there would be a royal visit to the fortress. The day that Gwain recalled was exactly the third time that such a visit, from the First Prince, had occurred.

Gwain had left the fortress for a short while, and the next thing that he heard was the sound of marching, and soon enough, thousands of soldiers appeared. In the midst of them, there fluttered a flag with a golden lion, the emblem of the Leonberger dynasty.

There was a king, and there was a prince, and there was that hated ambassador from the empire!

“Everyone, assemble here, and kneel,” said the king. Gwain and his comrades listened to the king’s bloody words. They heard him say that the grand vision had failed and that the empire had become aware of their existence. The First Prince was next to the ambassador. He smiled brightly, and the king said that everything was his fault.

Gwain and his comrades made up their minds there and then. They had sworn always to honor the Leonberger royal family, yet after that day, they had known the king to be a cancer to his kingdom, and they had denied him as the monarch of the country.

The king said that his actions were the only way to avoid hardship for the royal family, and the knights did not resist his decision.

All the soldiers who had come with the king were soldiers of the kingdom, so they aided in this breaking of the kingdom’s spirit, as they remained calm while the king denounced his knights.

The empire’s dog had wished the knights not to resist and quietly surrender and promised them that they would be free men if they broke their rings. Gwain and his comrades had hoped that the king would not accept such a dishonorable compromise.

However, the king accepted it and swore on his life that it would be done.

And so all three-hundred-and-twenty-three knights, Gwain among them, broke their mana rings with their own hands and their own wills.

The pain was terrible, yet the real torment came after that day. The cause they had devoted their entire lived toward and the skills that they had honed were lost and ruined overnight. Fragments of the shattered magical rings became like sharp daggers that pierced into their internal organs. So great was the pain of their severance that these knights could barely sleep without drinking all day. Amid their drunken and ruined lives, news of the kingdom reached their ears.

They heard of the feud between the king and the first prince, and the rumor that the first prince was on the verge of being confined after his many wanderings and moral corruption had brought shame upon his family.

Shortly thereafter, they learned that Prince Adrian had left for the north with his uncle. The tales from the northern war soon became common gossip. They heard that Count Balahard had been killed and that the shield of the north, Winter Castle, had collapsed.

Yet, they heard that the northerners were completely stubborn in their defense and that the first prince had rallied the survivors to defeat the king of the orcs.

It was also around that time that people started to call Prince Adrian by another, a name which sounded impossible for a stupid princeling to be called.

The savior of the north, no matter how stupid he is, hah!

Gwain laughed, yet not as loud as he thought he had. After suffering for so long, Gwain had started to suspect that he could no longer be angered. Funnily enough, his anger only came when he found out that the monthly royal grants would no longer be paid out to him.

Gwain was no fool, and he fully realized that it meant that the royal family had decided to forget about them completely.

“Fuck them all.” He stood from his seat, all the while swearing at the barkeep who didn’t come no matter how many times Gwain had called him. He stumbled out of the bar and began to piss on a wall. A hand fell on his shoulder.

“I don’t know who you are, mate, but you clearly decided to brush dust off of the wrong man,” Gwain said as he fixed his pants.

“You’re Gwain Gust, is that right?”

“I don’t know such a person,” replied Gwain without looking back.

“His Highness, the First Prince, has sent for you.”

Gwain stiffened where he stood.

“His Highness has politely invited you north.”

Gwain shook his head.

“You got the wrong man here, mate.”

He once more denied his identity, but this tactic did not convince the men who surrounded him.

“Let’s go north first.”

So Gwain did head north, dragged there as he was.

The north, which had been said to have become a sprawling field of bones, was quite different from what Gwain had imagined.

He thought that it would have the atmosphere of a cemetery, which was not the case at all.

Certainly, there were many traces left by the great battles and hideous massacres, yet there were people about the land, and they were quite active.

Men who carried weapons were to be seen everywhere, and the lords’ soldiers tolerated this open bearing of arms by the populace. In the atmosphere of the entire region preparing so diligently for war, Gwain felt out of shape. The whole kingdom’s forces had been shrunk by imperial decree, so the north felt like a different world.

“The northerners no longer believe in the kingdom and the nobility. They have decided to protect themselves,” explained the man who had found Gwain and had identified himself as an intermediate mercenary of the Silver Fox Mercenary Corps.

“So, you mean the lords know of this?”

“If it weren’t for the prince, not even you would have been able to join the army. His

Highness has given permission for the people to arm themselves, and the nobles dare not object."

Gwain shut his mouth, and although he was powerless, the first prince still disgusted him. However, he had heard the first prince's tale countless times as they journeyed through the northern provinces. The peasants and young people recognized the Silver Foxes and invited them to stay over at their homes, even if it made for poor living. On each visit, the tales of Prince Adrian were told, for it was thanks to him that the orcish army had been swept from the north, and neither did the Silver Foxes leave out the battles for Winter Castle, nor the saga that was the war upon the Rhinethes.

"I knew, right from the moment that we found you, that you bore ill will against His Highness. I advise you to be wary of such feelings, at least here in the north."

Gwain did not respond to the mercenary's words.

And finally, they arrived at Winter Castle.

He reunited with his old comrades after all that time, yet before they could fully enjoy the feeling of their reunion, the Silver Foxes took them somewhere: They came before the first prince.

His chubby breasts were gone, and no trace remained of that curious and playful boy.

Prince Adrian was a well-formed young man.

Looking at that scarred face, Gwain felt indescribable emotions. He felt anger first, and was then overwhelmed by a feeling of deprivation. He was miserable to the core, for the man who had thrown them into the gutter had become the hero of the north.

All these feelings of abandonment, anger, and shame roiled in his mind until he could only be confused.

"What kind of glory did you come seeking here?"

Gwain could barely hold it. He wished that he had rather died that day instead of living a life so hard. He was terrified by his regret and angered that he had survived after he had torn his mana rings apart.

Why had he even come here? And why did his comrades do so as well?

Before this, he had not even thought of taking revenge, and the first prince had now him criticized for it!

“If you came here, intent on sticking a knife into the back of the trash that had sold you and the kingdom out…”

It would have been better for him not to come, for now, the anger had come back once more. Even if everyone else in the realm had dismissed them and kicked them away as underdogs, as failures, it did not seem possible for Prince Adrian to do so.

Gwain let flow with swear words and insults as his shame and anger only increased.

“Here I am, the sinner who broke your rings and betrayed the kingdom’s future! If things are left as they are, this sinner becomes king. Isn’t it terrible indeed?”

When Gwain somewhat awoke from his emotional fugue, he felt very confident, grasping a sword once more.

He rushed at the first prince as if possessed, and in the next moment, he crashed to the floor in pain.

“I said I would give you a chance, I never said I would give you victory.”

The moment that he saw the blatant ridicule on the prince’s face, he charged, and once more was he beaten back.

“Then, you don’t have to wait,” the First Prince continued as he stared at Gwain’s fallen comrades.

“You can infuse mana into your swords again… That is, if you want to prevent the trash that had sold you and the kingdom out from becoming the king.”

Prince Adrian’s words were blurring together in Gwain’s mind. He asked a boon from them, and Gwain challenged him.

“You will fight for the kingdom, not for me.”

Gwain had had no intention of becoming a soldier for the kingdom; he believed

himself a coward after destroying his rings.

That was at least the case until the first prince spoke of the empire. He had offered the knights another chance of revenge, of warring against the imperial dogs. Prince Adrian laughed, asking if they would rather crush one stone or three trillion?

Crazy guy, but even if you're crazy… you're still rotten.

Gwain knew that he could not let this prince dominate the kingdom; he didn't even want to allow a man who had sold his country to have any say in the country's future. Gwain vowed then that he would claim his revenge for that shameful day whether he stored mana in his heart or in his stomach.

Despite such promises, Gwain still laughed. He had guessed that there remained little in this kingdom that was worth burning, but now the need had come upon him, and he knew that there was still a great many things that had to be burned.

He figured that his feelings were definitely ugly and could not be compared to his brilliant sense of duty in the past.

For the first in many years, Gwain fell into a deep sleep without needing to be drunk.

His comrades continued to flock to the castle, and men who had lost their will to live came out blazing like avenging angels after they met with the First Prince. Even if they had been beaten up, they had magic again, so they used it to heal their bodies. It was a low-level technique, yet as the saying goes, if someone is hungry, you never cover the rice, whether it be hot or cold.

Funnily enough, it had been the first prince who had taught them. It was as if he had given them whetstones to sharpen the daggers that they would plunge into his back. Gwain could not comprehend Prince Adrian's thoughts, yet he didn't really care about them.

No matter what the prince was thinking, all that mattered was that Gwain gain his revenge. First, against the empire that had made the king deny his knights and the knights deny their king. And then against the informant who had caused it all, yet the latter revenge could wait.

Gwain had seen the admiration for the prince countless times upon entering the north, and even greater was that feeling among the people of Winter Castle. What

kind of man was the first prince to the northerners?

The broken knights still held the same hellish hatred in their hearts, yet Gwain and his comrades were not selfish and petty enough to ignore the northerners simply because they had their own private grudges.

Gwain figured that maybe he and his comrades would not even be selected to take part in the great war, though he knew that if he had been among northerners, then maybe the empire might never have claimed his rings.

Gwain wondered whether the first prince was trying to figure out such things and use those facts to his advantage, yet he could not be sure.

How could you guess the inner thoughts of such a spontaneous man?

What remained clear was that Gwain and his comrades would not ignore the cause, so they had hidden their undiluted hatred deep, for they knew their private revenge was still far off.

They had to regain their strength first; then, they could focus on revenge. Each time Gwain channeled mana, the broken fragments of his rings shook his entire body, and he could not help but recall the shame and sorrow of that terrible day as the tormenting pain pierced through his body. While experiencing another one of those maddening days, Gwain heard the first prince make an unexpected proposal.

“If there is anyone who wants to join us, they can march with us along the royal road and to the capital.”

Gwain and his comrades were conflicted by the announcement until thirty of the three-hundred-and-six knights finally applied to be part of the marching order. Some of them just wanted to see the king again, even if from a distance. Others had chosen to go to the capital, being driven by vague emotions, and Gwain counted among their number.

Gwain and his comrades marched between two-hundred rangers, and they were followed by the First Prince and his escort of lancers in black armor. While they marched through the north, a great many people joined them. There were some heads of northern families whose family names were well known, while the other smaller noble families were ones that Gwain had only then learned of.

Regardless of the low or high prestige that these nobles held, they all showed the same extreme courtesy and respect toward the first prince. And what of all the young people and peasants? Every time the army passed through a city, the outpouring of hospitality was tremendous. The armed forces made a terrifying spectacle, yet none of the northerners who welcomed the first prince and his attendants showed any fear or were in any way reluctant to visit the camps. So extreme was the hospitality and worship of the common folk that it seemed to Gwain as if Prince Adrian was a king who reigned a foreign world called the north. Such scenes repeated themselves in the central kingdom. Count Brandenburg had personally met the prince by the bridge that spanned the Rhinethes and which connected the northern and central regions. The count's hospitality and respect were also considerable, though not as extreme as that of the northerners.

Gwain and his comrades sighed at such things, for even if the sight that they saw was pretty didn't mean that it had surpassed their limits. Still, they dared do nothing, for their swords felt heavy in their scabbards. They exchanged heavy-hearted glances with one another, and then Gwain suddenly felt as if he was being watched. The First Prince had been riding ahead of them. He now stared squarely at them.

Gwain could not try to comprehend the thoughts and feelings that were contained in those blue eyes.

On the night that they camped but a day from the capital, Prince Adrian came to them.

"From now on, keep your eyes open and watch everything that occurs on the royal road."

Such words clearly held an unknown meaning, and Gwain could not sleep until dawn. He noticed that his comrades also had bags under their eyes.

"March!" came the roar of a leading knight, and the procession from the north broke camp and once more marched along the road. As the afternoon passed, they finally reached the plain that overlooked the capital.

"From far off, we see the troops of the Royal Guard approach!"

The Black Lancer heard the words of the cavalry scouts, and soon the military flags of the north were hoisted, and the northern lords stood stiff and looked sharp.

The riders that approached were dirty and dusty, and they stopped under momentum and talked in a hurry.

“Highness! It is an honor to meet you! I am Palail, leader of the 24th Squadron from the Patrol Cavalry of the Royal Guard Corps!” shouted one of the horsemen, who seemed wary despite being in the presence of his fellows.

“We pay homage to Your Highness, the First Prince.”

The leader of the cavalry patrol hesitantly approached and gave his polite bow to the gathered nobility.

“Not far from the capital, we have prepared a field for the soldiers of the north to rest upon.”

The field itself acted as a euphemism, one which had a clear meaning. The northern army had already increased by nearly a thousand men as it had traveled down the royal road. On the face of it then, the recommendation was reasonable.

The capital was the heart of the kingdom and the monarch’s home, and it was reasonable that an army, no matter who led it, could be barred from entering the city. But these warriors, this army, was the very same that had repelled the large army of monsters that had invaded the south! They had, for all intents and purposes, saved the capital!

“We stay here, ready the camp!” ordered the first prince.

“Ready the camp!” the order flowed through the mouths of spearmen and knights alike.

“Well, Your Highness?” the cavalry leader had seen the northern army unpacking their wagons and setting up camp, so he had called to the first prince with a grim face.

“I’ll give you a day,” was Prince Adrian’s only response.

“What does Your Highness mean by-“

“Twenty-four thousand orc heads,” came the dry reply, due to the uncomfortable nature of the topic. “That is the number of monsters that had invaded the kingdom,

as well as the number of monster heads that we had severed."

The fervor and spirit contained in the prince's words were neither dry nor embarrassing.

"Chief Palail of the 24th Squadron from the Patrol Cavalry of the Royal Guard Corps!"

"Yes! Your Highness!" replied the utterly depressed cavalry leader, as if he was having a seizure.

"I will ask you now," said the prince as he regarded the man. "Are we a triumphal army which had fought and bled for this kingdom? Or are we merely a group of factions that the kingdom is wary off?"

"Sir, this is a victorious army!"

"Then why are we treated as if we were almost an enemy, or a mere band of mercenaries, instead of a victorious army!?" shouted the first prince.

"Sir, I am sorry!"

The cavalry leader dismounted, knelt before his horse, and bowed his head.

"Rather than hiding like a meerkat on the plains, I would rather march back north. Unless we were given a proper greeting, of course," Prince Adrian said coldly.

"Either we are given a triumphal march through the streets, or a victory ceremony. Anything else, you will have to prepare properly, as befits our great triumph. I give you a day, and I won't wait here for more than a day."

The cavalry leader mounted his horse and rode away.

The first prince stared into the direction into which the cavalry patrol had disappeared. He clucked his tongue.

"The royal road hasn't changed at all," he mused.

It was unknown whether he was lamenting a certain state of affairs or whether he was merely referring to the peaceful atmosphere of the royal road and the surrounding countryside.

Only the prince's cold face, as if the frosts of the north had been gathered into a single entity, gave any indication that his mind had experienced some discomfort.

Gwain and his comrades had observed the entire scene, their faces stern.

CHAPTER 86
NOBLES, PRINCES, KINGS, AND EMPIRES (3)

The unannounced arrival of an army threw the capital into pandemonium. Its presence threatened the citizenry, for they had always just seen the armies of the kingdom from afar as they marched along the royal road. The army that now waited so near the capital had kicked up dust and camped down in the dirt, and although the soldiers must surely be tired, it seemed as if they possessed a terrible motivation.

Such a determination naturally scared the citizens, for they were used to the city's soldiers, who did not look so purposeful.

A good few concerned citizens asked a capital guard about the army's identity, and he informed them that they were the northern lords and their soldiers. The tense atmosphere remained, even as this news became public.

"But why haven't they entered the city yet?"

"This is all too much for your bad heart, is it?"

The citizens worriedly gossiped as they stared at the open city gates.

One of the merchants who lived in the capital had his own speculations on the matter.

"I'll let you know, right now, the tale of the royal family and their abandonment of the north in this recent war, even if the royals are trying to keep it secret. So maybe this is like a protest, them coming here to the capital in force."

"Hah, this man! He eats all his expensive meals and talks bullshit all day," one citizen mocked as he heard the merchant's story, and those around him laughed.

"It was only yesterday that His Highness the Second Prince arrived from the northern war. What you say makes no sense, peddler! So watch your mouth before someone stitches it shut with their fist."

“No, it’s not like that! Just listen to me, when the Winter Castle collapsed, and the north became naught but empty fields, the royal family-Huh!?”

The merchant had been pressing his point with some frustration, and suddenly his face hardened as the capital guards appeared and started to surround him.

“You have been found guilty of treasonous talk, harming the kingdom with your lies and fabrications. Your deeds must be punished.”

“No! No, it’s not like that! Really, I was wrong, I was jus-“

The merchant pleaded and apologized ceaselessly, but the guards were relentless and gave his pleas no heed. They dragged him into a courtyard and strung him up, letting the rope take his life as they let go of him.

Scenes like these occurred all over the capital as panic and rumors spread like wildfire.

“The citizens of the capital are quite anxious. The northern army stationed outside the walls are having an unimagined effect on the social fabric. Our soldiers of the capital are apprehending and executing any dissidents, which only increases the panic.”

After hearing Suha’s report, the second prince, Maximilian, jumped from his seat.

“I have to go to His Majesty,” Maximilian said as he headed to that part of the palace. As the second prince left his palace and headed to his father’s quarters, he noted that the royal palace’s atmosphere was cluttered and a tad bit chaotic. The effect of the army’s presence on the fields outside the capital had spread into the palace as well. Maximilian quickened his stride.

After walking for quite some time, he spotted a familiar middle-aged gentleman in the distance.

“Marquis of Bielefeld!”

The marquis, who recognized the prince, bowed his head in greeting.

“Your Highness.”

“I think we both seem to have found our way to His Majesty in this tumult,” Maximilian told the marquis, who looked quite worried about unfolding events.

“I’ll inform His Majesty of the present situation and spare you some trouble, marquis.”

“Then, this old man will believe in Your Highness, and be on his way.”

Maximilian gave another glimpse at the marquis, who looked pessimistic about the entire affair, and then headed into the king’s offices.

“Tell him.”

At his words, the palace knight guarding the door carefully knocked upon it, announcing that the second prince had arrived.

“I heard you, knight,” came a gruff voice from inside

“Please enter, Your Highness.”

Maximilian saw his father as the palace knight opened the door. His face seemed wracked by worry. Such emotions lingered only for a while when he saw the second prince. His expression became bright, for the son that he loved had visited him.

“Sire…”

“Come in, son. You don’t have to be so rigid in front of your own father.”

Maximilian looked at his father, who held his hands on his knees.

“Have you eaten? I know it’s not yet time for dinner, so let’s eat together, I’m heading to the hall as well.”

As the king’s soft voice continued to speak, Maximilian’s expression hardened.

“Father.”

“Okay then, tell me.”

“Your Majesty, let’s allow my brother Adrian and the northern lords into the city.”

The king's face had been warm and welcoming like a spring breeze. It froze in an instant.

"They came here uninvited, so why must they be allowed to enter my city?"

Maximilian sighed, and his voice was as frigid as his father's face.

"If you hail them as a victorious army, they will enter the capital with glad hearts, and would be welcomed by the populace."

"Unusual, unusual! We break with tradition." The king frowned before continuing. "Did they fight alone? No! Our royal forces were there, and the central lords as well. You can't give just them a victory ceremony."

Maximilian sighed inwardly once more. He knew that the only option was forced, and he figured that his father probably knew so as well.

Nevertheless, the king continued to furnish reasons why he was unable to meet the first prince's demands.

"Your Majesty, if you do not greet these men in grandeur and give them their triumph, who else will be inspired to give their lives for our kingdom?"

"Hah! Being born as a noble in my kingdom means that they are born with an obligation to protect my territory and their country. Anyone would have done as these northerners did, if they were in their situation."

Maximilian would have ardently believed such words in the past, for then he had believed it only natural for all those of noble blood to fulfill their duties and responsibilities. He had known that there were corrupt nobles but had thought them to be a scant few. He believed that most of the kingdom's lords were real nobles who knew of honor and devotion.

It was not so.

Only after he had left the capital had the reality of things bared itself to him. He saw the depravity of the lords who abandoned Winter Castle, letting it fall due to the encouragement of imperial agents. He had seen with his own eyes how the lords of the central region had abandoned the line of defense and fled.

There were far more piglike nobles, blinded by greed than true, honorable, and righteous nobles.

Maximilian knew that the kingdom was rotten to its core, and only his father, the king, seemed unaware of this fact.

The prince gave a bitter smile. His father had not changed at all, and Maximilian knew that if he had not seen for himself the kingdom's state outside of the palace, he would have sympathized with his father's sentiments.

Now though, he was faced with an unbearable, uncomfortable feeling in his heart.

"If the northern lords had supported Winter Castle without hesitation, these great hardships would never have occurred. Their wounds were self-inflicted, through all their foolish demands, ignoring reality and paying tribute to the empire. "

Maximilian watched the despondent features of the king and felt like cursing. He had to turn his head away; he could no longer bear the sight of this father. All the while, the king continued to criticize the behavior of the northerners.

"Since their ancient forefathers had no pretense, being plain men, they would never have made such demands as these lords do now. They are deceivers, these lords, wicked men, and I have known of their darkness and vanity well before now."

At some point in the king's ramblings, the blame naturally fell on the first prince.

"Because of his vanity, the citizens of my capital are trembling in fear, but these northern soldiers worry little about the hardships they inflict. And of course, because of his petty vanity, all the soldiers of the north have come here and yet are unable to sleep in warm beds. But I don't even concern myself with such things."

"Sire!" Maximilian shouted, no longer able to bear hearing the king's ramblings. "Now is not the time to curse their nobles, no, it is time to realize the true state of circumstances and embrace them, to mollify the hearts of these people whose territories have been devastated by war."

Certainly, the king's face hardened when his second son, who had always agreed with his father's opinions, expressed his disapproval.

"Father, they don't ask for great boons or treasure, nor do they ask for anything else.

They just want a victory ceremony. Theirs is not a difficult request, and we do no stand to lose anything great by it. It is just a triumph."

Maximilian could not stop himself, now that he had begun pouring out his heart.

"It is only a half day's march along the highway of the capital."

It broke Maximilian's heart as a son to see his father's face like that, but someone had to step up and convince the king. Adrian had clearly stated that if his army were not received as a victorious force of the kingdom, he would leave things as they were and march back north. Maximilian knew that one could not take lightly the actions of a prince who had so brutally killed twelve lords of the north.

If things went too far, the north and the royal family might not get a chance to fix the bad blood and mistrust that had sprouted from the war.

"Your Majesty, a single command is all that's needed. I will open the gates and greet them, just a word from you, and I will do everything after that word."

Maximilian asked again and again.

"You are…" A strange emotion appeared on the king's face as he looked at his son.

"Your Majesty, please, mend their bleeding hearts with just a single word."

The king looked silently at Maximilian for a while and then turned around.

"Go there."

"Sire?"

"I have granted your request."

The king had finally allowed the victory ceremony. Still, it had not been the request from the northerners that the king had heeded, but rather the pleas from the second son that he so cherished.

Maximilian understood the portents of his father's choice and motivations all too well, and he was very concerned by what had occurred.

The first prince, who had left the capital as if exiled, was no longer just a political gimmick or an immature son who could be held prisoner by his father at a word. Adrian was a war hero who had ended the threat that had ravaged the north and was publicly supported by the seventeen lords who had their holdings north of the Rhinethes River.

His existence was no longer inconsequential enough for the king to treat him carelessly and without the dignity due to being a prince.

Maximilian only hoped that his father fully realized this. His brother wouldn't be as patient as before.

"They shall be thrilled by Your Majesty's benevolent thoughtfulness," Maximilian said as he gave mouth-praise, concealing the complicated nature of events from his face. Maximilian left the king's offices and immediately tracked down an officer of the Royal Guard.

"Prepare everything for the victory ceremony."

The faces of the palace knights and the guard captain, who had been in grim moods, visibly brightened upon the command.

* * *

It was not so difficult to turn the panic of the crowd into an atmosphere of jubilation.

The citizens were informed of the great ordeal that the north had overcome, and this news was enough to ease their spirits.

They had locked their doors and barred their windows, but now all such portals were thrown open, and the populace ran out to get a glimpse of the victorious warriors.

They stared with great anticipation at the gates of the capital, but they did not give voice to the cheer that existed in their throats. That was because the first soldiers to appear were the defenders of the capital. The cavalry of the capital dressed neatly, rode out before the northern army.

"Aaagh! Booo!"

“Aaah! Aaaghh!”

The citizens lined up along the central boulevard screamed as the soldiers of their own city passed, while the Royal Guard cursed and shouted as they struggled to control the crowd.

The northern army began to pass through the gates. Seventeen banners of the seventeen lords were held, yet one of these banners had sent the onlookers into a panic, causing them to scream in terror.

It was not a flag: Where one would expect the family’s embroidered symbol, there was piked a huge head.

It was a great dark green head, with a long tongue lolling from it.

Many of the citizens fainted as they looked into those red eyes, so wide open even after death had come to them.

The capital’s highway quickly became a mess as the guards struggled, making every effort to calm the crowds.

Maximilian watched the tumult from afar and brought his hand to his forehead.

“I was told that they would keep that thing in Winter Castle.”

The head that the Black Lancers paraded with as if it was but a banner was indeed the head of the Warlord. The head of the king of the orcs who had turned the north into a field of bones. It was natural for the citizens of the capital to panic, for they had never seen a single monster in their lives.

Maximilian could only sigh, for he had couldn’t figure out why the Northmen had not chosen a parade full of joyous cheer, with rose petals raining down on their heads. Instead, they preferred to march down a causeway filled with terrified screams.

He didn’t worry much, though, because by now, he knew how difficult it was to understand his brother’s thoughts. As always, he guessed that it would not be long before he understood what it all meant.

His belief only lasted for a while.

As his brother finally passed through all the crowds to reach the gates of the royal palace, he tilted the head of the Warlord and held it near to the nobles who had come out to greet him.

“Aahah, get it away from me!”

“Woah now, that’s dirty!”

When Adrian saw the nobles falling to their asses or running to hide behind walls, he smirked.

Upon seeing that, Maximilian pondered some more about his brother’s actions. At first, he had thought them to have some deeper symbolic meaning, but now he wondered whether Adrian simply wanted to pick on the nobles and show off his spoils of battle.

‘Hooof weeeshik, hooof weeeshik.’

The pole was continually swung around, and the Warlord’s head swiveled upon it until some of the nobles fainted.

“Brother,” Maximilian faintly said as he stepped forward, his face trembling.

“Maximilian.”

“You must have had a hard journey, coming all this way.”

“I did tell you, I wouldn’t be away for long.”

Maximilian could not help but laugh as he heard his brother’s same old arrogant and confident tone.

“You are indeed back, brother.”

The first prince smiled at his brother’s hospitality and raised his head, studying the palace.

Above those great outer walls, in a high spire, there sat a king with a stern face.

Though the day was hazy, the first prince somehow saw that cold gaze and smiled.

CHAPTER 87
NOBLES, PRINCES, KINGS, AND EMPIRES (4)

At first, some of the northern soldiers were led to temporary quarters outside of the capital after the victory ceremony was done with, but thanks to the stubborn persistence of the prince, every soldier had been given lodgings inside the city walls.

Suddenly, the royal officials had their heads wrapped around the problem of finding accommodation for close to a thousand soldiers.

The capital guards were also pressed hard to patrol the streets and establish boundaries in the case of unforeseen rioting or other emergencies.

Prince Adrian dismissed their dissatisfaction, stating that it was only right for soldiers who had risked their lives to enjoy a comfortable stay.

“Don’t drink too much, don’t start any trouble, and don’t leave the capital. If you keep by those three rules, you can do anything else you want to do while in the capital.”

The first prince had even taken further steps, allowing his soldiers to roam freely and opening up his own pockets to pay them a stipend. The soldiers were greatly excited, and the northern lords also enjoyed watching the first prince’s largess.

So instead of having a hard stay in barracks, the soldiers stayed in lodges and inns and taverns throughout the capital, and their pockets stood thick with coin.

“After all, it’s only His Highness who understands the grievances of simples soldiers like us.”

“I don’t have many words for these nobles, but I doubt there’s another person like our Highness in this world.”

Balahard’s senior rangers had taken over a bar and were praising the many virtues of the first prince.

“Is this Highness you speak of the second prince?” one of the bar patrons quietly

asked, who had at first been afraid of the rough looks of the rangers. The man who had asked the question had been afraid the previous day, but this day he was curious why the rangers had such rosy language for a royal.

“No, not him,” said one of the rangers, raising a single finger. “It’s the first prince who has furnished so fine a stay for us.”

The regulars of the capital shook their heads at this. It was only in the north that Prince Adrian was called a savior and a hero. Here in the capital, it was known that the prince was a lecher, an exile, and some even said that he was a traitor.

“I don’t like your expression, friend. You got something to say against the first prince?” a ranger demanded from one of the regulars.

The men’s faces became full of fear, and one of them raised his open palms into the air.

“No, not all! It’s just, well, we don’t know much about the first prince.”

“That’s right, I only know that he left the capital, and now he’s back. I haven’t heard anything else, but let me buy you northern archers some drink so we can talk about in detail.”

The down-to-earth rangers quickly relaxed their expressions at such words.

“Hmm, that’s a good idea.”

One of the rangers brought the tankard of ale to his mouth and then began to talk about how great ‘Their Highness’ was.

“The first time our Highness came to Winter Castle, it was I, Jordan, who met with him. I saw him then, as he faced a blizzard on his own, shouting and leading his terrified soldiers from the front, helping them through the storm. “

The moment that Jorden had seen the boy struggling through the snow, he had thought that his sight had betrayed him, for so stunned was he by the appearance of a prince leading four large soldiers through that blizzard. Jordan’s tale brought a lively debate to the patrons.

“So you’re saying that he ran a full day and a half? With one on his shoulder and the

others by his side? Through a blizzard that grown men struggle to stand upright in?"

Jorden's face became red as the regulars questioned him.

"A man would freeze to death if he walked leisurely through a blizzard. What must I tell you? I saw him running, and right now, you are so sure that you don't believe me?"

"No, no! I believe you, please continue."

One of the patrons called for more drink, but Jordan indicated he still had some and continued his tale.

"The first prince killed an Orc Warrior on his first mission, and…" Jordan spoke on and finally recounted the tale of the battle with the Warlord at Winter Castle. The patrons, who had at first listened with half-ears as they nursed their drinks, now followed Jordan's tale, and they were lost for words. When he told them of the months of struggle and death that the soldiers of Winter Castle had faced, they all groaned in sympathy. When they heard of the former Count Balahard and his knights being cut down as they faced the Warlord, the regulars raised their cups, tankards, and glasses to commemorate the death of such brave warriors.

Finally, Jordan spoke of how the once-defeated northern army had retaken Winter Castle, and the men's hearts were filled with wonder.

"If His Highness had not been present in the north, we would never have reclaimed the castle and the Balahard name."

"Ah, but if you have never regained that castle, you would have enjoyed the luxury of tilting back glasses in this warm sun of ours!" one of the patrons mocked. It seemed that, from all the stories, these men of the capital could still not believe that a boy of sixteen had defeated a monster that not even the greatest knight of the kingdom could kill. And some of them doubted that Prince Adrian could have solved the hardship of the north by rallying its lords.

Whether people believed them or not, the rangers cared little.

"Okay then? Our Highness is just that kind of person, and I don't know what you central people think of him, but he is a real hero. I am ready to die for his cause and for his sake any day and any second."

“Hah, it must be all the shivering you folk of the north do, if all of you would sell your lives so readily,” one of the patrons joked in a friendly fashion. The rangers, whose faces had mostly been serious up to now, relaxed and laughed along.

“Bilbo here, well, he almost didn’t march south with us, and I see he doesn’t even know how to enjoy the luxuries of the capital,” one ranger joked as he clapped one of his comrades on the shoulder.

“You think so? I’ve tricked you then,” Bilbo responded.

In the end, the party of the capital served the rangers generously with alcohol and snacks, asking that they enjoy themselves properly. It seemed that they wished to pay for the tales of the north, in their own little way.

“I’ll show you the true toughness of a northerner! Come now, let’s start with ten cups and empty them like men, till only one stands!”

“As the best drinker in the capital, I accept your challenge!”

The rangers and the people of the city mingled and engaged in noisy, boisterous banter. Suddenly, even the bar owner joined the fun, downing a tankard and belching loudly.

Still, some men could not join in the revelry and the bar’s friendly atmosphere.

They were Gwain and his comrades, who had followed Prince Adrian here.

“Do you believe what he said?”

Gwain did not answer, for it was indeed an incredible story.

A few years ago, there was a boy without any special duties or good qualities, and that fool of a boy had not shown any wisdom when he betrayed the country’s knights to the empire. Who could believe that such a pathetic creature could become enough of a knight to defeat a monster that even the greatest knights could not defeat, and all of this in just a few years?

‘A prince who spoke with orcs.’

It sounded like a heroic story, perfect for any bard to sing, even if there were

elements of vanity contained therein.

Still, it was difficult to dismiss all such tales as lies. Indeed, if such tales were false, then the lords of the north wouldn't be supporting a prince as if he was king, and the soldiers wouldn't so openly talk of giving their lives to someone who was not their lord.

"Let's just observe things for now," said Gwain.

He thought back to the first prince telling him to observe the happenings in the capital, and he guessed that if he and his comrades did so, they would soon enough grasp the true meaning of things.

Gwain and his fellows had woken up and had remained silent for a long while. They had left the bar without even touching the glasses of drink that they had ordered.

The rangers had mixed with the other patrons. A few of them glanced at the back of the bar as they whispered to one another.

"I… I don't know what the hell Niccolo said to inspire such actions. Didn't we have more guys here, other than us?"

"I understand what you're saying, friend. What's in the head of those scholarly humans? Roughly, I say we don't break our teeth, and just drink more booze. That's it."

"That's it, but-"

"Where's that person, that one that was drinking, that one who bet me, huh?"

Upon this drunken realization, the rangers changed their expressions and rushed back to the table.

* * *

Gwain and his comrades headed straight to their lodgings when they left the bar. They encountered a messenger from the first prince, who had been awaiting them. It was a knight that they had encountered several times before, and Gwain remembered her name to be Arwen Kirgayen.

“His Highness is waiting,” she stated in a voice as cold as steel. Without giving the knights much time to respond, she turned around and started heading in a direction. Gwain and the others followed her as they wove through the complicated maze of streets and alleys until the walls of the royal palace finally appeared before them.

“Aagh,” moaned Gwain. There it was: The royal palace, which he had thought he would never enter in his entire life.

Since he came to it after he had lost his rings, his emotions were very complicated. He forced such dizzying feelings down as he continued walking. After traversing the palace grounds for a long time, they reached the First Palace.

‘Klang!’

An explosive sound of metal upon metal broke into his ears. He frowned as he turned to its source and saw that the first prince was dueling with a handsome knight in the center of a spacious hall.

‘Klang! Klang!’

The knight wore golden armor, and a lion was upon his tunic. He was obviously a member of the palace knights.

Still, the first prince was exchanging blows without a sign of being pushed back, and this against a palace knight. They were said to be the best in the kingdom.

Gwain watched the battle between the knight and the prince, who fought as if he was possessed. Arwen bowed and headed to the other side of the hall, her duty done.

‘Klang! Klang! Klang!’

An intense barrage of strikes occurred, and the knight and the prince both stepped back after their close melee.

“You have grown to an extent that I had not expected,” said the knight.

“Fighting Carls must have been different than what you had expected,” came Arwen’s comment from the side.

“Yes, His Highness is out of breath!”

“Hah, I have cut down so many orcs, so it has been a while since I’ve faced a Knight of the Ring, so I must say, my insides are sore.”

“Never one to be fooled, then.”

Both the first prince and the knight laughed as they faced each other.

“You have returned hale.”

“I’m okay, but I would never have imagined that you, Carls, would have kept your talents so hidden.”

“Well, I didn’t think that you would attack me with your sword before uttering a single greeting.”

Gwain was fascinated by the entire exchange.

The man whore a tunic depicting the Leonberger dynasty’s dragon slayer symbol, which was a roaring lion stepping on a fallen dragon.

Such a symbol, of being defiant in the face of adversity, is exactly the opposite of the family that had sold out three-hundred-and-twenty-three knights, Gwain included.

His face became distorted as he recalled the deprivations that had been thrust on him.

“I don’t know who you are, but I advise you to get rid of that hateful gaze, and that violent attitude. This is the place where the ancestor of all the Leonbergers rest, and not a place where the disrespectful dare tread,” the palace knight said as he looked at Gwain.

The power in the room had sharply and swiftly risen, and Gwain and his comrades had unwittingly stepped back.

Gwain chewed on his lips, trying to bear that terrible feeling.

He had been yelled at by a knight whose position he envied, and then he had been pushed back by the man’s rings.

“Release the momentum of your rings, Carls. I have summoned them here.”

“Your Highness, their disrespect is so blatant-“

“Release your momentum.”

The knights had been breathing hard yet now felt a moderate generosity toward the man who had broken them as the palace knight stopped channeling his mana.

“I just hope you don’t forget where you are,” the palace knight said as he stepped back, his sharp gaze never leaving them.

They could sense his willingness to cut them all down at the first signs of threat.

“Receive this,” the first prince said.

There were stacks of fuchsia clothing before him. Gwain stepped forward, took a bundle, and unfolded it.

It was a knight’s uniform. Although it did not bear the dragon slayer’s symbol that they had wished for all their lives, the fuchsia suits were the uniforms of royal knights, uniforms they have never worn.

The pattern of a crouching lion was a symbol that only the eldest son of the kingdom could wear, for it was a purely royal symbol.

“This-“

“Do not worry, wearing that suit does not make you my knight. I’m sure I’ll be in the royal palace for a while yet, but I got around to doing this, at least,” the first prince said.

Gwain could not answer as he blankly stared at the uniform.

The hatred in his heart still existed, but so did his desire to be a confident knight.

To his surprise, he realized that he still held that latter emotion.

CHAPTER 88
NOBLES, PRINCES, KINGS, AND EMPIRES (5)

The Leonberger family summoned the nobles of the kingdom to them. Under normal circumstances, it would have taken longer to gather them all to the capital. These were not normal circumstances.

The nobles in the capital and the outlying cities acted under orders from the imperial ambassador, the Marquis of Montpellier. So they hasted to the palace, fearing what would happen if they went against the imperial decree.

In just two days, half of the kingdom's nobles had arrived at the palace. They were taken directly to the banqueting hall.

"I heard that the lords of the north have been praised for our victory against the orcs. I don't think we're going to have a celebration banquet this time round."

"Well, isn't this atmosphere too tense for that, anyway?"

The nobles in the hall were making quite the ruckus about the presence of the northern lords, who had created so much tumult in the capital.

"Who would've known that that little man, Adrian, would've gone all the way there."

"Yes, even our many gifts couldn't win them over in the end. I mean, we know that the Balahards have squadrons of hard men, but why march them south?"

"Oh, by the way, His Highness the First Prince was awful, I lost a guardian! I wasn't really sad, but still…"

"There came a story to my court, saying that the northern parts are defiant after having to host His Highness the First Prince and his many balls. If that is true, it would be quite a shame."

The first prince, who returned to the capital after his exile-like departure, was a very interesting topic of conversation to most nobles.

Although most of the tales that had reached their ears were sad tales, the nobles' expressions did not show any remarkable emotions.

"I heard that you have already paid for it."

"It is said that he humiliated decent people with that horrible… object that he had brought from the north. It seems that his nature, his spirit, has not changed at all, even after the war."

"Perhaps he wasn't even properly part of the war, having gone through no trouble at all."

From the viewpoint of the gathered aristocrats, the dirty-headed first prince and his pet nobles of the north had spread many false stories of their struggles and were rightly mocked and insulted from every corner of the banqueting hall.

"Tsu, it's all so frivolous, isn't it?"

"I don't know how to express my condolences and remembrance to knights who have dedicated themselves to the kingdom, so I guess I am not in good form today, and so shall relent from showing my more vulgar side."

Only a scant few nobles, the Marquis of Bielefeld among them, mourned the deceased people of the north and honored the noble deaths of the defenders. The Marquis, guessing that the current meeting was somehow related to the imperial ambassador, could only hope that the day would not be a shameful day for the kingdom.

As if having called a tiger by merely thinking of it, the imperial ambassador entered the banqueting hall.

"Eternal friend of the kingdom, the Marquis of Montpellier, whose authority has been legitimately recognized by His Majesty the Emperor of the Burgundy Empire; Ambassador of the Empire, Crien de Burgundy, graces us with his presence!"

It was truly unusual that the ambassador, who normally showed off his prestige by entering just before or even after the king, had appeared so early.

"Hey, is something really going to happen?"

The Marquis of Bielefeld observed the ambassador with a stern face. He noted that the ambassador was moving faster than usual – as if he was being haunted or chased by something.

“Ambassador, you have come?”

A few of the less aware nobles approached and abased themselves before the imperial ambassador.

“From now, you shall only speak to me if I have spoken to you first,” Montpellier said as he put a damper on the nobles’ eagerness to please him. The eyes of the aristocrats stretched wide as they fearfully retreated from the ambassador, not understanding what it was that they had done wrong. They returned to their places, thinking that they had offered the wrong seeds and that the ambassador was grumpy due to a bad planting season.

“Is it possible that someone even higher up than Montpellier was sent from the empire?” one noble, who had been carefully observing things, said to the Marquis of Bielefeld. It was a sensible assumption, for the Marquis of Montpellier looked like a conscripted peasant who had faced off against a master of battle.

“I am anxious, I am anxious,” the Marquis of Bielefeld muttered as he continued to observe the ambassador as the members of the royal family appeared one after the other.

“The legitimate scions of His Majesty King Lionel Leonberger of the Leonberg Kingdom, the second son of the Leonberger family, His Highness the Second Prince Maximilian Leonberger, and the third son of the Leonberger family, His Highness the Third Prince Gillian Leonberger, grace us with their presence!”

Both of the princes entered and stood before the central dais in the banqueting hall. Bielefeld felt a strange feeling when he looked at the princes. The third prince, who was always surrounded by feckless nobles as he boasted of his prestige, was the same as ever. The second prince was not, for a hard face had replaced his usual soft smile.

Somehow, the second prince knew something about the events that were about to unfold.

The Marquis of Bielefeld moved closer and tried to approach the second prince, but

the great door of the banqueting hall opened, and the royal courtier cried aloud once more.

“The legitimate scion of His Majesty King Lionel Leonberger of the Leonberg Kingdom, and the most precious first son…”

Through the open door, the first prince appeared, followed by knights and nobles of the north.

“Haaaah!” came the collective sigh of the nobles as they saw the first prince. The boy that had existed but a year ago was nowhere to be seen. The face that swiveled above his muscular breast was angular, and his body could easily be compared to that of a sturdy knight.

Above all else, the nobles’ attention was drawn to the scars that ran across the prince’s entire body.

The exposed flesh of his hands and neck were full of nasty scratches, while snake-like scars writhed across his chin and forehead.

“Ah, the wounds!”

“Hey, I can’t hear what’s happening from the rear.”

While the nobles gossiped, the first prince studied the banqueting hall. The nobles who met his gaze caught their breaths and almost staggered back. The bodies of those who had retreated were full of goosebumps.

The prince laughed as he looked upon those nobles.

“Aren’t you going to kneel before me?”

The tone of the prince’s laughter sounded friendly, but the nobles could feel the chill race down their spines as if they had been thrust through the ice of a frozen river in the dead of winter.

A few nobles jerked awake and fell to the floor, their knees striking it, and their heads bowing.

The prince descended the stairs, each of his footsteps sounding like those of a great

beast that had lumbered into their midst.

The nobles held their breath and pricked their ears as if they were small animals hiding in the bushes as they waited for the predator to pass. And when the first prince finally came to a halt, the nobles almost vomited as they gulped in air after holding their breath for so long.

They did not dare lift their heads, and they greeted the king in this prostrate manner.

“His Majesty King Lionel Leonberger, who is the rightful but humble ruler of the Leonberg Kingdom, who is more honorable and wise than anyone else, approaches, and graces us with his presence!”

The king appeared through the open door.

“Well!?” he demanded as he paused for a moment, noticing that the atmosphere in the banqueting hall was strangely subdued.

He turned his head and saw his eldest son standing alone among all the nobles, who had all bowed to their knees.

The king’s face became hard, and the first prince grinned.

Still, King Lionel ignored the gaze of his eldest son and moved on. He didn’t want to be face-to-face with the annoying boy, but the fact that the nobles had bowed deeper to their King than usual pleased him greatly. When he discovered that even the imperial ambassador had bowed his head in respect to him, the king felt positively delighted.

Certainly, it was a delusion, a grand illusion that King Lionel had created within his mind.

The nobles and the ambassador were not worshiping the king who had walked lightly like a deer into their midst, but the prince who crouched like a wild beast behind him.

In that entire room, only the king did not know the truth.

* * *

The very moment that I saw the indolent faces of those bloody nobles, my repressed anger poured into my heart.

But, I remained patient, for it was not yet the time to burst out in anger.

No, now was the time to bring comfort to them, to leash and cage them like one would leash and cage ten thousand yapping dogs.

I was patient with my anger, and may the king reveal himself!

“His Majesty King Lionel Leonberger, who is the rightful but humble ruler of the Leonberg Kingdom, who is more honorable and wiser than anyone else, approaches, and graces us with his presence!”

Finally, the king appeared through those wide doors of the hall.

His face hardened when he saw me, yet he quickly righted himself and started walking among the nobles.

He walked so forcefully, his every step being placed oh-so-regally.

He walked, pretending to possess a dignity that did not exist.

He passed by nobles like the clown that he was.

He finally plopped down on his throne upon the lofty dais.

“Everyone, you can lift your heads now!” the king said, forcing dignity into his voice.

The nobles hurriedly awoke from their daze. I observed the scene as I turned my head.

The once-secret knights, the royal swords that had been forged with such great care, yet had been broken before ever being used, were trembling. The emotions that emerged on their faces were complex enough that I found them difficult to read.

It seemed as if they welcomed their reunion with their king, yet they seemed to resent the king who had not recognized them greatly. Or perhaps, they were relieved by their good fortune that the king could, in fact, not recognize their faces.

“If you want it, you can be given a chance to stand independently in the future.”

“We don’t want it.”

I had spoken silently, and they had refused.

“If so, just watch.”

They cast questioning glances at me – as if asking what the hell they should be watching.

I quietly studied the hall. There was a blind king upon the dais, an irresponsible and incompetent monarch who had neglected his country. A blind king who had let his nobles fall and who had trapped himself in a dream.

Underneath this king were wicked men who clung to the rotting branches of the giant tree, their tongues flicking like tongues of serpents. Lame-footed loyalists, who had done their best to support the slanting mass of the tree, were passively watching the situation, their faces filled with caution and concern.

The mistletoes of the north, one crushed by the harsh winds of winter, had grown stronger and were all looking at me.

Finally, there was a dog who had once barked for the empire, yet had now been tamed by me, even if he wished that his leash would snap.

All these actors would soon be part of my ridiculous little skit, while three-hundred-and-twenty-three broken knights, a sword that the kingdom had failed to forge, would look on. They would look upon the bare rotten face of the kingdom in all its putrescent vileness.

That was what I wanted to show them. They would have to find the answer on their own, but I would show them the way.

I would watch all from where I stood. And I shall judge.

“The reason that all the lords are gathered here today is in accordance with the ‘Imperial Ambassadorial Emergency Summons of Authority’; and such a call is in full accordance with the treaty between the Burgundy Empire and the Leonberg Kingdom,” came the first statement from a clown upon the throne, from the blind

king.

“Since the majority of the nobles of the kingdom have gathered, there will be no problems if we start now,” the fat dog barked after the words of the blind king.

“So, the reason I have invited so many prosperous nobles here today is because I want to discuss the future of the kingdom.”

The dog from a foreign country was barking about the kingdom’s future, and not one person disputed his right to do so.

Now was my time – the moment had arrived to end the helpless inertia of these nobles and their king.

“Before all that, we should talk about the war in the north that took place some time ago.”

My imperial dog looked at me and stepped back. I took the center stage.

“Bring it,” I said, and Arwen and some knights placed a large chest in front of me.

I opened the chest violently, its top banging to the floor.

I pulled out the Warlord’s head, its tongue lolling, and threw it.

It flew right among the high lords, landing in front of the king’s dais.

‘Tukudukuduk.’

The head, quite larger than the torso of an adult man, rolled upon the floor and came to a rest.

“Aaah, huuuh?”

“Oh, oh, hah?”

The nobles screamed in terror, and the banqueting hall quickly became a chaotic mess.

“What are you doing!” shouted the king as he lost his composure, rebuking me, his

face almost blue with anger.

I gave him no heed, took the Warlord's arm from the chest, and casually thrust it over my shoulder.

The nobleman who got punched by this flying orcish limb passed out without a scream or a whimper.

"Aaaah!"

"What's happening! What's that?"

"You're out of your mind! He's crazy! He can't do this without being crazy!"

Amid the screams, groans, yells, and cries of the weak and feckless nobles, the angry king shouted.

"Since we have won, we must show the proof of our triumph, the remains of the enemy leader, in front our king!"

I announced this to the hall – my arms spread wide.

"Am I right, Your Majesty?"

CHAPTER 89
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ENEMY SHIPS, REWARDS, AND LOOT (1)

The raging screams and ranting babbling broke off like a wave hitting a rock.

The nobles' mouths moved like the puckered mouths of stranded fish, their eyeballs rolling back and forth between the king me in those white-bleached faces of theirs.

The king stared at me with widened eyes. His face was filled with anger – as if he would jump up and shout, yet he buried himself ever deeper into his throne. He looked like he was trying to hide in plain sight on a throne that didn't even fit his arse.

I walked toward the dais, taking in the king's tacky appearance.

Knights dressed in golden armor put their hands on their hilts and surrounded the king. They had cooler heads than those who had been swept away by tension and concern. The King of the Orcs, the Greenskin King, who had once made all the north tremble as he led his tens of thousands of orcs, had now become naught but a spectacle.

I picked up the Warlord's head, straightening my waist as I stared at the dais.

Another king sat upon it, just as I held the head of a king in my hands.

I held that head out to King Lionel, and he rebuked me.

"How on this accursed earth can you show off that hideous thing with pride!?"

His eyes swam in anger, and without fail, hatred and contempt soon followed.

I hadn't understood those feelings before – I hadn't known what the original owner of this body had done.

Now I knew what I had carried on my back, unknowingly carrying such sin and karma.

Nonetheless, I could not sympathize with the king's feelings. His was the karma of an unscrupulous monarch – one who had raised his sword but who had been unable to lead like a proper man.

Lionel Leonberger was an incompetent king who had a pair of eyes but could not see into shadowy corners.

Such karma, and the actions of the past, do not fall squarely on the shoulders of a child who had been thirteen at the time.

However, the king still behaved as if the failure of the great vision, and the increasingly miserable reality of the kingdom, had all been caused by a young boy.

The king had decided that he was not responsible for anything, and he didn't correct anything.

He just resented reality and turned from it.

Lionel Leonberger did not even know that resentment and hatred had stained his soul.

He just hated his little son.

It all became so funny to me, all of a sudden – The karma of the son who had broken three-hundred-and-twenty-three knights and turned the centennial vision into nothing.

The karma of the father who sat and watched as the shield which had protected the kingdom for centuries was broken.

Whether on this side or that side – both Adrian and Lionel were covered in filth.

But the father did not even think of meeting his son's gaze. In my eyes, his stained soul was so clearly visible. I looked at the king quietly.

I had the power of [Judgment], so his true essence was bared to my sight. His soul was naked, and his true shabby face revealed.

He was not weak, but he was not strong enough to withstand external pressure.

He was not stupid, but his mind was not agile enough to go ahead and get the job done.

He was not incompetent, yet not competent enough to take on the greater challenges.

Those eyes of his weren't dark either, yet they were not bright enough to see the world outside of the palace.

His soul was a vessel that would have made him enough of a king if these times were peaceful times.

Yet, the vessel was severely lacking and could not overcome times of chaos.

Perhaps through his entire life, lacking the requisite traits, he had worn royal vestments that had never truly fit, and he had struggled to bear the weight of a crown upon his head.

He must have failed time and time again and became frustrated upon each failed attempt.

The negligent and uncertain manner in which he had dealt with the orcish war must surely be one of the failures that so heavily weighed on his heart.

"I fought for three months, waiting for reinforcements that never came."

But it wasn't just me who had been harmed by his blunders.

"Two corps, four thousand soldiers, that's all that you sent. They weren't enough. I lost my uncle, I lost countless numbers of comrades who I had laughed and joked with just the day before. There were more than ten orc corps, and soldiers had to stab each monster ten times with spears before they died. All the while, several southern legions and several knightly orders waited but for the king's command to draw their swords and join their northern brothers. Such great castles and courageous knights, with hundreds of years of proud history, and they were never sent north!"

Even then, the king dared to make excuses.

“The Winter Castle, which had lasted for centuries, fell, and all those brave knights lost their lives.”

“In the end, you won! You came to my city, calling yourselves a victorious army, so you won!”

“A victory with such a great wound suffered is barely a victory.”

I refused to hear any more excuses.

“But I have sworn to never again bleed so much just to eek out such a victory.”

The king had thought about the meaning of my words, then rose from his throne and pointed at me.

“Go! I don’t dare spit it out from my open mouth! Do you know the meaning of what you have just said?”

I watched the clown king, and I regarded him coldly.

“It means that I will never fight alone again.”

“What!?”

I gave a glance at the stern-faced king and then turned to address the hall.

“All of the noble families in this kingdom had received a request for aid from Winter Castle!”

The nobles had been watching my quarrel with the king with some excitement, but they now bowed their heads in anger at my sudden outcry.

“Who of you have responded to our pleas? None!”

None of them had, and I didn’t hear a single one of them dare reply.

“What in all hell did you do while we fought and died!?”

Excuses in suppressed voices came from every quarter.

The distance was too far for a march, or they had no one to lead their troops; one said that he was sick at the time, another that he had never received a messenger.

“I won’t stand here, listening to your useless excuses!” I declared to all of them.

“If you don’t help now, then the north will not fight for you in the future.”

“Yeah!? So let’s hear it, and you say you’re not arrogant? If the north doesn’t fight, will you just open your gates and let the monsters pass?” came the cry from behind my back.

“Is there any reason for us not to do so?” I asked the king as I turned my head.

“Who are you turning your back toward, boy?”

I turned to face him.

“What then!?” he continued to shout. “Who the hell has given you such powers, to do what are you intending?”

“I am talking about the man who is qualified to act as he deems fit,” I said as I faced the king. “I am talking about the head of the Balahard family, the commander of the Third Legion, and the shield who guards the north.”

“What?”

“Do you understand that I believe Count Vincent Balahard to have qualified to act under his own autonomous power?”

“What are you saying, who gives you the right to-“

“If I have been entrusted with the loyalty and all the lands of the seventeen families north of the Rhinethes, am I not entitled to say such things?”

The king’s eyes stretched open even more as he noticed the approaching northern lords.

“I state before God that I have transferred all rights of Count Bert of the Shurtol family to First Prince Adrian Leonberger.”

“God, I, Guinness of the Ghurn family, transfer all my rights to the first prince.”

“Before God, I state that I, Anders Astein, give to Prince Adrian…”

One by one by the northern lords knelt before me and professed their allegiance.

“What!? What!?”

The king could only shout the same words over and over again, with a face that seemed to show the emptiness of his soul.

“Do you still believe me to be unqualified?”

There came no answer, for the king had fallen before the violence of the situation, and even if he intended to counter me, he could not do so. It was pathetic.

Once more, I shouted at the nobles as I turned my back on the king.

“All I ask is that we fight together! Is that so difficult!?”

They hurriedly cast their eyes down, not one of them answering me.

“I tell you all now: This is your last chance!”

They acted as if they had heard nothing, and I looked at noblemen whose tongues had turned to smoke.

“You will send one of your immediate family members to Winter Castle. I don’t care whether it is the eldest son, the second, or the youngest.”

“Why must we-” one of them dared to ask before I cut him off.

“They will become officers in the Third Legion, and will serve in the north for a time.”

“No way in hell!”

“I cannot accept that!”

Seeing that their children were so valuable to them made them at least look better than the king, even if they were equally incompetent.

As I looked at them, I heard someone cough from behind.

“Huhgm.”

It was the Marquis of Montpellier.

“It is impossible for me, as a foreign ambassador, to interfere in any way with the kingdom’s internal affairs.”

His sudden statement brought great confusion to the nobles.

“From my personal point of view, as a friend to the kingdom, I believe it will be an invaluable experience for each noble family, for are our children not the same people who will lead our nations? The defense of the north can always be stronger, so I do not understand why you view this so negatively.”

At least no one hurriedly spoke or cried out, yet they still struggled to understand Montpellier’s words.

“As an aside, His Highness’s concern exists because of the brutal nature of the war in the north, and he only wishes to prevent future bloodshed. I myself, as a friend of the kingdom, have been greatly reprimanded due to my failings of properly examining the difficulties of you, my friends. Be assured that if the same peril is faced in the future, that I, your friend Montpellier, will be in trouble if I fail to aid you.”

Even though I had not ordered him to, the Marquis of Montpellier had sold out his empire before a crowd of nobles. The effect that his words had was so good that it had begun to make me feel bad. The nobles, who had been rebelling as if they were about to enter open revolt, became gormless, dumb, and placid as they took notice.

As I watched their faces, my insides churned.

It still seemed as if they put far more stock on the words of foreign ambassadors than on the words of their own prince.

I stored that fact in my mind once more and noted those who most ardently worshiped the empire.

“As far as I know, the north is a poor place, not rich at all. So, here is my suggestion: What if we fund a portion of their armaments, and in so doing, share their burdens in

a more intelligent manner?" an unknown nobleman asked Montpellier.

Many of the other nobles readily agreed and made fun of the northern economy.

"Now, I don't know why you ask this of me, I am just a foreign ambassador."

Montpellier glanced at me as he responded in such a fashion.

"Your Highness, there is a person who has uttered an opinion, and I offer his request to you."

The nobles' faces became instantly pale as they noticed the ambassador's blatant disregard of their plight.

Looking at their pale faces and their hazed eyes, I laughed and laughed.

My laughter completely enchanted them, and it had not even come into their minds to ask the king's opinion.

Time passed, and not one of them had dared to so much as open their mouths.

The nobles were not looking good at all, for they now faced the prospect of sending their precious sons north, and the king seemed confused because he could not understand my behavior.

Perhaps he thought that I wished to serve my self-interest by manipulating everyone in the hall.

He most certainly wondered how an idiot who had sold out the secret knights could now dare to act in such a manner.

But I was no fool, and what I was hoping for wasn't a mere reward from the king.

I looked at the nobles, and they knew that they would now have to give me a member of their families or the property they had so pampered themselves with. If they gave up their children, I would accept them as hostages and teach them to support the north. If they gave money, I would make them pay at least the worth of their son's life in wealth.

Of course, I didn't suppose that they would so easily bend to my demands.

They pretended to submit due to an imperial ambassador's prestigious statements, but their faces would turn as soon as they reached the safety of their castle walls. Instead of sending their precious children, they would find a way to cheat me from having their sons, or the bastards would say that I pulled an unreasonable trick on them, and so they would refuse to pay.

That way, the north would gain nothing.

I had to force them to open the veins that they truly cared for, and at that moment, I possessed the bait that would make them offer up their most golden child.

I glanced at Montpellier, and he spoke.

"The fact that I have not properly examined and countered this recent war means that I have not been faithful to my duty as the plenipotentiary imperial ambassador and as the unparalleled friend of the kingdom. Therefore, we of the empire are fully aware of our failed responsibility after this last war, and so we want to prevent such a tragedy from occurring again in the future."

The king gave Montpellier a bloody look with a face that showed he already had a headache trying to figure out what kind of trick the ambassador was trying to pull.

But today, Montpellier did not exist as the ambassador of the empire, so everything he was saying would benefit the kingdom.

"By the authority as the plenipotentiary ambassador granted to me by His Majesty the Emperor of Burgundy, I will open the kingdom's tower which had been sealed under the treaty, up to a limited level!"

The king had been looking at Montpellier with a tired face but jumped from his seat as he heard those words.

"All, say it all again!" Lionel Leonberger demanded.

"We will release the seals on the kingdom's tower up to the third floor, and we shall temporarily lift the ban on the training of wizards and the usage of combat magic, as had been set out in the treaty."

"Tell me again!" came the king's cry.

“Congratulations! The Leonberg Kingdom can now train wizards up to the third circle.”

The king was trembling with excitement, but I knew that he had become prematurely thrilled.

“This is an official matter personally approved by His Majesty the Emperor, and His Majesty, after taking into consideration the great torments suffered by the northern part of the kingdom, has allowed the construction of a new tower.”

The king looked as if he was ready to pass out after hearing such good news.

It had pleasantly surprised him that the tower’s seal had been lifted, but he could scarcely believe that the emperor had approved a new tower!

“Further, the location of the new Spire is limited to the lands north of the Rhinethes River, and full authority over the construction and management of the tower rests with His Highness, Prince Adrian Leonberger.”

The king stretched his eyes and looked at me.

No, not only he, but all the gathered nobles were staring at me.

It seemed that the opening of the tower and my imperial puppet had been better bait than I had reckoned.

If you were to see people with dog-like faces, you only have to dangle a fleshy bone before them.

And soon, everyone gathered there began drooling like the dogs they were.

CHAPTER 90
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ENEMY SHIPS, REWARDS, AND LOOT (2)

The Marquis of Bielefeld had been shocked when the second prince, Maximilian, had returned home.

The boy who had been so kind and wise had become a strong man in mere months.

Seeing the prince's vigorous appearance, the marquis had known that the Leonberger blood still flowed strong and that there was still hope for the kingdom.

All in all, the growth of the second prince was remarkable.

"I am normal, and compared to my brother, I have changed little," Maximilian would say to sharp-eyed nobles who praised him, and he always spoke of himself humbly, almost as if he was ashamed. The marquis greatly admired the prince's humility at that time.

The common saying that no brother was only an older brother was not used in the Leonberger royal family, so the marquis saw little reason for Maximilian's humble attitude.

The first prince once more visited the capital, and it was clear that he had become a completely different person. The only thing that remained the same was his arrogant look.

His body was scarred, and his eyes had become fierce and feral, like those of a beast. Many lords and knights now followed the boy who had been alone his entire life.

His presence was also overbearing, and even the high lords had inadvertently bowed their heads to him. If Maximilian was a charmer who chose the central path, his older brother was the ambitious one who forged ahead and paved the road.

From the moment that Prince Adrian had appeared, he had overwhelmed the wills of

his audience – as all the nobles had bowed before him.

The Marquis was concerned by the first prince's extreme ambition, Prince Adrian was too rude and radical by far.

Even when he had dealt with the king – his father in private but the monarch in public – his words and actions had been far too harsh. He had looked like a child who knew not how to control a sharp blade, and his every action had seemed precarious.

Whatever one says must be held to in practice instead of theory, and the path one walks must be straight and righteous.

No matter the past, it was certainly true that the first prince held true to such tenants.

Yet, his journey was too violent, and his steps too eager, and he enjoyed staring at those who he had trampled as they lay screaming.

Prince Adrian possessed ambition, but he lacked the tolerance to pave the road for the future safely.

'So close, so close,' the Marquis thought ruefully. 'Is there any advice I can give him? Would he even listen?'

Either way, the situation did not look good. That which is strong must someday break.

Moreover, the new political movement's strength was not perfect, for the northern nobles who supported the first prince were only a section of the entire nobility of the kingdom.

They had been born and raised in a barren land, and so they respected his spirit, yet their support bases were fragile and their poverty undeniable.

The first prince should not have revealed himself so soon.

The greedy and cunning hyenas would not be completely scared away by a young lion. They might be bowing their heads before his prestigious presence and for his cause, but their insidious nature could always prove more deadly than the valor a lion.

It was clear that the young lion needed protection from the pride – even if the pride leader was an old lion with blunted claws and plucked teeth.

The Marquis had hoped that the first would soon realize this.

He soon realized, rather, that all his feelings had been like the feelings of a worried old woman.

The first prince was not just a young lion. The Marquis of Bielefeld had realized this as soon as the imperial ambassador had named Prince Adrian as tower lord of the new Spire. Up till then, there had been little hope for Bielefeld to embrace, and he did not intend to embrace the first prince's little coup.

When he heard the news of the Spire, though, he regretted that he had ever doubted the first prince.

The seed of wizardry had dried up in the kingdom during the past century. Evidence of the first prince's brilliant political ploy was the sudden change of heart of the nobles. Before Montpellier had spoken, they had no wish to send their sons or their funds up north. After the announcement of the new tower, these same men had stayed behind, all discussing who shall be sent north. Some of them were so bold as to offer their eldest sons, while others wanted to send their youngest and most pampered ones.

All of these nobles clamored and bickered, saying that it had to be their sons that became sorcerers or wizards. Of course, if one considered such things with a cool head, it would quickly become clear that not just anyone can be a wizard. However, these men weren't able to abandon even the unlikely chance that their sons would be among the first new mages. In the end, it mattered little whether they gave up their eldest sons, their second sons, or their adopted sons, for all that truly mattered was the intelligence of the candidate.

"Hmmm," the Marquis of Bielefeld mused to himself as he left the banqueting hall, after seeing even his closest friends so ardently discussing the new tower. Bielefeld then headed straight for the First Palace.

"Well! Even if I had brought him a gift, and not seen him in such a long time?"

"His Highness has just entered his bathtub, so please come back later, m'lord."

The entrance to the First Palace looked like a small aristocratic town, packed with nobles, most of them leaving minutes after they had arrived.

“I am Count Dunstein, Dunstein! Tell His Highness I ask to see him.”

Count Dunstein was among these nobles, and he was considered one of the greatest lords in the east.

“His Highness has just had his meal. If you return later, m’lord, I’ll tell him that you are here.”

The same answer was given to a prestigious countess, who wasn’t even allowed to step over the threshold.

“Well, well,” the Marquis of Bielefeld said, seeing that the prince knew the value of the weapon he had in hand.

‘It will be difficult to meet him today.’

Seeing that a stern and upright knight had been posted as the gatekeeper, it seemed clear that none would meet with the prince, so Bielefeld turned around. At least, he tried to turn.

“Sir! Are you not the Marquis of Bielefeld?”

The palace knight, who had been so consistent in barring entrance for the desperate nobles, stared and stared at the marquis.

“Have you been seeking an audience with His Highness?”

“Yes, but His Highness said that he has eaten, so I shall return later.”

“No sir, please come inside and wait.”

“Huh?”

“Come this way, sir.”

The Marquis crossed the threshold into the First Palace and went through the door, past the palace knight, who tried to pretend that he was not smiling.

“No! Why can he enter? Who will go in, and who will not?”

“The Marquis of Bielefeld has already made an appointment.”

“What bare-faced lies! I saw so clearly, with my own eyes, that His Excellency was about to leave.”

“Hah, Bielefeld was just acting in consideration to His Highness, so that he does not have to suffer the trite talk of an elder.”

Many of the nobles were hurling insults from behind. However, the palace knights remained consistent in the application of their duties.

“Huh, those are some great guards,” the marquis noted.

He had long known the nature of the palace knights, but he didn’t know that there would be one among them with enough spirit to so blatantly say what he wished to say in front of numerous nobles. The marquis was being led through the First Palace, and no one paid much attention to him.

“What is the name of that knight?”

“Who is Your Excellency talking about? Ah! You mean Sir Carls?”

The palace knight who was guiding Bielefeld had named the knight as Carls Ulrich. The marquis also learned that Carls and some of the knights had been protecting the prince’s vacant palace for more than a year. The Marquis of Bielefeld could only shake his head.

“Your Highness, His Excellency the Marquis of Bielefeld is here,” the palace knight said as he knocked upon the door and then opened it.

“Please enter.”

The marquis patted the knight on his shoulder and went straight into the room.

“You came earlier than I expected.”

“Your Highness.” Carls had told some nobles that the first prince was eating or that he was in filthy water. Instead, Prince Adrian was drinking tea with two ladies who

sat opposite him.

“Mr. Marquis.” The seated women had recognized the marquis, had gotten up from their seats, and bowed their heads to him.

One of them, Bielefeld as recognized as the knight Kirgayen, whose name was famous across the capital – He had never seen the other woman’s face, yet that did not mean that he did not know who she was.

The rumors that the first prince had knighted one of his maids were still a staple piece of gossip when anyone spoke of Prince Adrian.

Most such rumors scraped the surface of obscenity, so the Marquis had never given them any heed.

“I heard that Your Highness was trying to sleep after the meeting, yet I find you having tea at your leisure?”

“Did you even believe Carls?”

“No way, Your Highness. Everyone was disbelieving of his excuses.”

The first prince giggled, and then eventually had to laugh at the marquis’ answer.

“Please, sit down. Arwen, Adelia, sit down. Are you fine, Marquis?”

The Marquis of Bielefeld nodded roughly and took a seat.

“I spoke with Your Highness right here, a bit more than a year ago.”

“Indeed, and I didn’t even keep the custom of serving tea back then.”

“You did it, Your Highness, you got your army.”

When they met a year ago, the marquis had suggested that the first prince leave the capital and gather forces and resources in the provinces. He had stated that the prince had nothing to gain by staying in the capital. The first prince had then followed his uncle as they left for the north. And now he had returned as the leader of the north, a leader who had gained the loyalty of all seventeen lords.

“I sometimes think that I have suffered in the north for no particular reason.”

The marquis studied Prince Adrian’s face as he said this. The face was beautiful and resembled the queen’s, yet was crisscrossed by many scars. It was clear to what extent the boy had suffered in the north.

“You had to suffer, Your Highness, for in the end, it was worth it.”

“Even if those are empty words, they lighten my heart.”

The first prince lounged back on the sofa, burying his back into the cushions.

“Okay then, Marquis, did you come here due to an interest in the tower?”

“If I said that I was not interested, I would lie. But, I have something to tell Your Highness,” the Marquis of Bielefeld said as he glanced at the women.

They understood the meaning of his glance.

“We shall get up.”

“It was nice to meet you, Mr. Marquis, and I’ll see you next time.”

Arwen and Adelia left the room.

“What talk is so important that you send others out of the room?”

“Your Highness,” the marquis said, giving a small laugh, “I implore you, do not be too hostile to His Majesty.”

The first prince frowned.

“Don’t judge His Majesty solely on that which had been revealed, I say this with certainty: His Majesty is never what Your Highness thinks he is.”

Prince Adrian did not answer.

“The empire took its time to weaken the force of the kingdom. Moreover, they had worked diligently to sever the limbs of the royal family. Their efforts became even more severe in His Majesty’s generation. His Majesty has lost far more than Your

Highness can surmise," the marquis quietly said as he looked at the stubborn prince.

"And he has kept a lot, for-" the prince started to state, yet the marquis cut him off by standing up.

"Please keep in mind the fact that the royal family is the most reliable support Your Highness has, they are not the enemy," Bielefeld said.

"If your sword is sharp, you can easily draw it and swing it, yet beware in becoming too eager and saying that there are always more people to be sliced, more people who have to be killed."

The Marquis of Bielefeld continued to say that strong things must always break. He finally left the prince after having given his sincere advice.

The next day, the debate on the orcish war began, a debate which the king had delayed the day before.

The first proceeding was the furnishing of gifts to the central lords and the central army for holding off the monsters from the southern banks of the Rhinethes. More rewards followed as the meeting continued, rising ever up the ranks.

"On behalf of the royal family, I gift ten horses, fifty sets of iron armor, and one hundred bolts of silk to the Second Prince Maximilian Leonberger, who had fought in the battle from the front lines, leading the legions on behalf of the royal family."

"The castle was still ruined, Your Majesty."

The king kept his silence after he had given Maximilian his reward.

However, all the gathered aristocrats in the banqueting hall knew that the official governmental procedure was not yet done with – The first prince's reward yet remained.

Even if only half of the tales were correct, Prince Adrian still had to receive a greater reward than anyone gathered there. His achievements were those of a hero who had saved the kingdom, and so it was difficult to determine what manner of prize he deserved.

The anguish was felt as the king continued to remain silent.

To the Marquis of Bielefeld, it seemed as if the king's heart was caught between two conflicting emotional tempests.

The line of succession surely depended on the manner of gift that the king gave his sons.

If a great boon were given, then, on the surface, it would seem as if the discord between father and son had ended. Naturally, the first prince would regain all his rights as the eldest son, even if he would always be despised in his father's eyes.

If an inadequate gift was given, it meant that the king did not accept the first prince as a member of the royal family and did not accept his proclamation as being the lord of the north.

No matter how much the king's hands were tied at that moment, he was still the ruler of the country, for he sat on the throne.

"Well…" Even though the king had already thought at length about what to do, he still struggled to speak.

Fortunately, the first prince was not as rude and violent as he had been the day before.

The Marquis of Bielefeld smiled.

'Don't make unnecessary enemies – the royal family is not your enemy.'

The first prince seemed to have accepted his advice to some extent, which greatly relieved the marquis.

Such relief quickly proved to be another illusion.

"Father, give me what I want!"

Bielefeld threw his head into his hands, despairing. There were clearly some brave enough to decide by themselves what rewards the monarch had to furnish for their contributions.

"I ask nothing else, father."

Seeing the king's stern face and sturdy manner, the first prince asked for his gift with great confidence.

"Just a single sword is reward enough."

CHAPTER 91
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ENEMY SHIPS, REWARDS, AND LOOT (3)

The Marquis of Bielefeld could only shake his head, for the first prince was a surprise that just kept on surprising. He had expected the prince to act utterly in self-interest when asking for a gift. The only gift the savior of the north – who had stopped tens of thousands of monsters from ravaging the south – asked for was a single sword. It all came as a relief to the marquis, who had expected the prince to ask for something unreasonable. The king had been worried about the political implications of any gift that he would give his son. Big gifts meant greater influence for Prince Adrian; smaller ones would gain the ire of a man who had the northern army behind him.

Considering the already testy political atmosphere in the kingdom, the giving of the gift was no trivial matter. The first prince had eased all such concerns as he publicly demanded nothing but a sword.

Even if he asked for the sharpest sword in the kingdom, it would still be a moderate gift, and if the prince was given a shabby sword, well, that is what he had demanded.

If Prince Adrian had made an unreasonable request, the situation would have been difficult. Thanks to his request, everything was easily solved.

But once more, the Marquis of Bielefeld had judged the situation prematurely.

“I have heard that you possess a sword granted to you by the famous master swordsmith. As it had been a royal sword in its very conception, I can’t think of a blade better than it. Will this gift be fair to you?”

“That’s right, it’s what I asked for.”

The marquis noticed that there was something the prince already had in mind.

“Come then, speak, don’t drag this out.”

The first prince did not refuse his father's command.

"The sword I seek is the sword that Gruhorn Leonberger used to kill Gwangryong, the great dragon. That's the sword I want."

The banqueting hall's atmosphere had frozen in an instant. The king stared at the first prince, his face as hard as stone.

"Am I correct in stating that you speak of the Dragon Slayer?" the king asked in a tone of voice as rigid as his expression.

"Yes, the sword that had pierced into my stomach," the first prince responded, his face possessing an innocent virtue as if wondering why everyone was so surprised that he wanted but a single old sword.

"Do you know what it means, if you ask for this sword?"

"I seek a piece of history, I seek to carry the names of those who have been forgotten by their descendants, those who have not been written of in this age."

The Marquis of Bielefeld closed his eyes as he heard the prince's answer.

"You don't know what you're asking for. If you knew, then you would never have asked for it!" the king stated in an overwhelming voice. "The black king had inherited that sword from the king before him, who had passed it on the next generation. It had come to me through my father."

The Marquis opened his eyes again.

"It was that black sword that you had taken and swung about without permission, it's an object that you never should have touched."

The Marquis studied the first prince's face as the king spoke on.

"It is the sword wielded by successive monarchs of our kingdom."

The virtuous expression that the king had maintained started to crack.

"It is itself a symbol of the royal Leonberg throne."

The final ground had quickly been covered as the king had made this statement. The prince's expression was no longer as casual as it had been before. Somehow, the first prince's face had taken on an unnatural and awkward mien. After a long silence, the first prince spoke – his voice as silent as the buzzing of a mosquito.

"Can't I just take the sword? Can you just give me the sword, instead of the throne?"

"Huh… Huhahahaaaahaaahaha!" laughed the king, finding his son's words to be utterly absurd.

He wasn't even angry at the absurdity of Prince Adrian's statement; he merely laughed again and again.

But his mirth only lasted for a while.

The king's expression hardened, and his face became more rigid than it had ever been before.

The Marquis of Bielefeld fully understood the embarrassment that had been thrust upon the king.

The first prince had demanded a sword that stood as a symbol of the throne before numerous nobles. The prince had even had enough balls to press his demand after the king had made clear what the sword represented. If the king rejected the request there and then, it would be nothing short of a declaration that the royal family had stricken the first prince from the line of succession, denying him the throne.

The question of whether the prince would ask for only a sword had never been something that the nobles had expected.

No one would have taken such a request seriously. Born as the eldest son, Prince Adrian had still succeeded in driving his father from him and repulsing the general aristocracy, so much so that a point had come where he was not recognized as the legitimate successor to the throne. The Marquis of Bielefeld had also held such opinions of the first prince at first.

Now the marquis stared at Prince Adrian's eyes, and he was surprised to see the embarrassment in them.

* * *

I thought that the royal family did not know the true value of my body because it had not seemed as if they had looked after it all that well. Moreover, I had even thought that the sword's existence was considered a mere trifle because the idiot of a prince had come in at will, freely brandished me, and swung me about like a tree branch.

Now I learned that I had symbolized the throne throughout all those centuries.

I had figured that my request to the king was not difficult, for I had asked for the one thing that they did not need or use. What I had instead done was to demand the throne out of the blue. My situation had become difficult.

"Can't I just take the sword," I asked, immediately becoming embarrassed by the bullshit that I had spouted.

The king's face also clearly showed his embarrassment at the situation. He had looked at me with a grim face.

So great was his abashment that he had even forgotten his hatred and anger toward me. I looked around and saw that the nobles had become uppity. The sound of their conversation had gained momentum.

They said that I had attained an unrivaled position, for I had obtained my very own Spire, and that I had now become the greatest enemy to the king. They all believed that I sought the throne. I did not, or at least, not in this manner.

And even if I inherited the throne, I did not want to do so by bargaining for it like some cheap trinket. The king dared not refuse my request now, and he thought that I was trying to force him to admit before all that I would be his heir. It looked as if I had planned this entire affair as a cheap attempt to claim the succession.

I had not intended the current situation at all. I watched the king. It would be better for him to refuse my request with a single word, but he seemed to be struggling under the choices. He faced a plethora of unforeseen outcomes that he would have to worry about in the future.

"Well," the king said as he raised his head after he had been agonizing in the uncomfortable silence. His cold gaze bore into me, and it felt like the frigidity of it sank into the very tips of my toes.

And a voice just as cold rang out in the hall. Damned it all, it seemed that claiming my

original body would have to be delayed for a bit longer. The king was anxious, for a while he could not reject me outright, he couldn't dare grant me such a powerful symbol of the throne.

I thought he would reject me; I definitely thought so.

"Good," came his voice.

I was wrong.

"You said that you wanted it."

The king granted my request.

"You shall get it, however, I shall not give it to you right now."

He had brought an unexpected element into the equation.

"You shall gain this sword only after you have accomplished a single task. Upon completion, you will have what you desire in your hands."

Although he had set conditions that required my compliance, I still had a chance to regain my body.

"If you cannot accomplish my quest, the Dragon Slayer shall never become your sword."

I felt lost and very much out of shape. The king's mindset had changed in that single day, so I was forced to change my attitude. Still, my embarrassment was only momentary. After the king had spoken, I immediately realized what he wanted from me. He wished to put me through a great trial to justify my wielding of such a status symbol.

The task that he would give me would be a difficult one for a prince to complete. If I failed, it would be in his full right to formally strike me from the succession. All in all, he was testing me, all the while fervently hoping that the candidate would fail the test.

"Hahaha!" the king laughed as he studied my features. It was ridiculous that this man now laughed at me. I had believed him to be a scarecrow king, sitting on his throne

every hour of the day just to keep that seat.

Still, this king still seemed to possess some qualities of a king.

Even if he had been unable to overcome the turbulence in his realm, he was more than capable to at least overcome a prince who had not yet grown up.

“Now, this is fun,” I muttered, for rather than being angry, I was motivated. I suddenly recalled a wager that I had in the past, a bet with a certain quad-chain knight who had stated that my usage of a mana heart was crude.

And what had happened after that?

I laughed, for I had enjoyed that bet, and so the king’s challenge seemed like it would be fun.

After I had awoken in Adrian’s body, everyone had looked down on me. No one had admired me, and they had all considered me to be boorish and doltish. It had been an interesting journey to overturn their expectations and see their expressions as they realized what I had become.

My heart was pounding already. Whether it could be called a bet or a test, and even if it had not yet started, I already looked forward to the king’s expression upon my success. I was greatly excited, imagining my smiling self standing before him.

“Congratulations, brother,” Maximilian said as he approached me.

“Now everything seems to have returned to normal.”

I shook my head upon hearing his heartfelt celebration of my ‘victory’.

I was only willing to receive congratulations later – when I had won.

I wanted to be congratulated while staring into the king’s dumbstruck face.

* * *

The nobles approached and also congratulated me. They flattered me as if I was already a king.

On the surface, their words could have been praise for me having regained my position in the succession, or they had merely flattered me in hopes of gaining some future reward from it.

Whatever their intentions, it was clear that my status was different than before.

Still, some better understood the king's heart and his strong position. They were the great lords, and their words of praise toward me were more distant than ever before.

They probably factored in the possibility of my imminent failure and disgrace. These nobles knew that if I passed the test, I would become the successor to the throne, yet I would be thrown to the wayside if I failed.

I could see into their scheming hearts as they planned on how they would position themselves after either one of the outcomes.

"Your Highness, were you truly unaware?" the Marquis of Bielefeld asked me after I had escaped the tedious nobles and returned to my palace. After hearing of Adrian's sins from Montpellier, I had gone to the trouble of researching the first prince's perverted past. I knew that it would be better for me to know what this body had done before getting caught in any traps again. "It was something my father had told me," Vincent had once recounted to me in great excitement as he had laid out the pathetic deeds of the idiot Adrian. Yet, while I had learned of my current body, I had never known that my original body had acted as such a strong symbol of the throne.

It wasn't difficult to guess why I had become a great regal artifact, and no one had told me because it was such common knowledge. It had just been my bad luck that an idiotic prince named Adrian had not known a single thing about the symbols of the Leonberger dynasty, and I had therefore been fooled into believing that the people of this age had forgotten my worth.

As I thought of such things, the Marquis of Bielefeld continued his incessant nagging, telling me that I had been too rash. I wasn't happy with his presence, for he had been moaning in my ears for two days straight now. It seemed that he had proclaimed himself as my political tutor. I had had enough of teaching, listening to the ramblings of Niccolo.

I reached a point where I believed that Bielefeld's nagging would never end.

"If Your Highness is given the assignment, do not accept it immediately. Only make a

decision after careful discussion and consideration."

Finally, the Marquis had left after he had delivered his final reprimand. Soon after, the queen came to my quarters.

Her presence was always the most unbearable of trails for me. Everyone in the world had ill feelings toward Adrian, and no one valued him. Therefore, I could treat them all with caution and deal with them from a distance, not hesitating in the slightest to overpower them. It was because so few of them would shed a single tear were the first prince to die.

Such was not the case with the queen.

She truly cared for her son, and if I had still been a sword, with Adrian dying as he spitted himself on me, the queen would have been the only person to shed any tears.

Because she was such a type of woman, I always felt smothered by her presence.

I had tried to avoid her ever since coming to the capital, but it didn't work out so well this time.

Carls was very happy with expelling numerous nobles from my abode, but he and his knights did not dare chase Her Majesty the Queen away.

"Why didn't you look after yourself before returning to the palace? What are all these wounds?"

I had to suffer such questions and worries and reprimands for a long, long time.

"It's all right, my Adrian, not everything is bad. Come here, dear."

In the end, I had to endure the indignity of that woman stroking my hair as if I was a little boy.

I managed to get her out of my chambers at last. While I was trying to calm my breathing, another person visited.

He was the same old man who had come to me when I had first awoken in the body of the obese and perverted prince. Nogisa told me to follow him, and he guided me all the way. Contrary to my expectations, he did not take me to the king's offices. No,

Nogisa led me to a different place entirely.

“Touch nothing, and do nothing,” he commanded me as we walked ever deeper into the tunnels and dungeons and cellars that existed under the palace like the diggings of prairie dogs. We came to a place, a secret place that none knew of.

“Just look with your eyes, not your hands.”

There, before me, and just out of reach, was mounted a sword.

It was my body that I so dearly longed to recover.

“Huh?” was all that I managed to say.

No matter how many times I looked away and looked again, the black blade before me was definitely my body.

It felt so strangely familiar.

I rubbed my eyes, blinked, and rubbed them again.

The sight before me never changed.

CHAPTER 92
ANYWAY, I'M NOT A GUY (1)

The dark gray sword had a blade which was about a half hand wide above the guard, from where it tapered to the point. That was exactly the same as I had been, as well as the rubies and sapphires set into my pommel. The black and white wing-shaped guard was the same as I had been in the past, as well as the leather grip. Nevertheless, I felt uncomfortable. I did not sense the energy that I had built up over my centuries of existence. No… I felt it, but it was so faint that I had to really concentrate just to become aware of it. After I had drunk the blood of so many powerful beings and sinister things, my body had risen to great and mythical heights of power. Now, it felt changed, as if it had been freshly forged.

It was an unexpected change, and it made me feel nervous.

I had wanted to recover Gruhorn's blade, which was a magical sword, sharp and beautiful, with ages of power stored in it.

"Nonsense…" I murmured, almost fainting after sighing many times at the reality that faced me.

"Your Highness, look, don't touch!"

"Get back," I said as I involuntarily reached for my sword. The palace knights who guarded the Dragon Slayer barred my way, and cast warning glances at me. My anger was great at that moment.

It's my body, my precious body! And there is something wrong with it! I was fuming that these knights dared block my way, dared to prevent me from tending to my form and confirming its status.

'Can't get out… '

Before I had even started to reprimand the knights, an unfamiliar voice entered my head.

‘Whose a highness here? I’m the only highness, you knights hear me? Hear me!’

It was a frivolous, critical, cynical, and indolent voice.

“Your Highness acts just like before,” the old knight, Nogisa, scolded me.

“Shhhh!” I commanded him into silence.

He raised his hand to his forehead but at least shut his mouth.

‘Is there any guy like my little parasite of a brother? I hate him, oh, I hate him.’

That casual, self-satisfied voice continued to buzz around inside my head.

‘You really don’t like it, do you? Standing around all day long.’

As I listened to the sound of that voice, I stiffened, for I remembered it well: “From now on, I am the master of this sword!”

It was the voice of a boy I had heard when I had woken up.

“Shut up! There’s nothing I can’t touch in this country!” – these were the words that had led to my current existence.

“With this sword by my side, His Majesty and the other nobles will have no choice but to follow me!”

That voice that had so brimmed with arrogant egotism, perhaps due to some ingrained inferiority complex.

“Great Dragon Slayer! Give me strength!”

The voice that had disgusted me the moment that I had heard it.

“Gruhorn!”

An utterly obnoxious sound.

“Ugh-woo-oh-oh-oh!”

It was the voice of the idiot that had so over-eagerly swung me about until he had pierced his stomach with me.

‘Look at that now, that old thing. It looks like an unlucky baby with a beard.’

The voice that babbled on in my head was an exact match for the one that I remembered.

“The first prince!?” I blurted out, and the voice inside of my head paused for a few moments.

‘No way! You… ’

More silence, and then the voice started crying and wailing.

‘Can you hear my voice!? Tell me! You can hear my voice, I know you can, I know you can! Answer me! Right now, you better answer now! Get me out! Get me out of this thing, please, save me, quickly! Hurry!’

His raw and unrefined thoughts crashed into my mind, disturbing me greatly.

‘Go and tell my mother right now! I am Adrian Leonberger, and I am trapped in a sword!”

That desperate and pleading voice came right from the first prince’s mind, the original owner of the body that I now inhabited.

His mere presence in my mind, and my original body, devastated me to my very core.

* * *

“The king’s orders were clear, and sternly voiced,” Nogisa said with great determination.

“So? Go and ask him.”

I continued to press my demand, stubborn as can come. I ended up sending palace knight after palace knight to convey my request to the king.

“His Majesty has accepted your request, Your Highness. However, he said that you

will not leave this room with the sword, and that you won't have long to be with it."

It was only after one of the knights had finally acquired the king's permission that Nogisa granted my request.

"There is only one entrance to this enclosure, so don't get strange ideas," the old knight informed me, then shut the door.

I was finally left alone. I strode forward, grabbing my body.

'Who the hell are you? No! Take me out of here first! Just take me out and don't listen to what anyone says!'

It was a terrible frustration t hold onto my true body, as its inhabitant was kicking up a ruckus.

Still, I ignored the idiot within and studied myself.

"Ah…" I sighed in relief. The energy I had thought to have completely dissipated flowed into my hand. Even though it wasn't much, feeling almost frozen, it certainly still existed.

It seemed that my body had fallen into a state of hibernation, just as I had been sleeping for the past four hundred years.

I tried with all my will and might to awaken that energy, but I could feel that my body never so much as considered the possibility of waking up. I knew why it was hibernating like this, and I knew why it had not given a sign of its great power: It did not recognize the person that held it as its owner – or didn't see me as qualified.

"Does that really make sense?" I asked myself. I had been keenly looking forward to the day that I would hold my original form once more, yet this impediment was unforeseen.

My body had rejected me.

It was greatly embarrassing, and I almost slumped to the floor, defeated.

My head was throbbing and aflame, for the situation was truly unexpected.

‘Take me to my mother right now!’

And all the while, the idiotic boy had kept moaning loudly, which had made my head hurt even more.

“Shut up.”

‘What? What!? You can say anything, but you tell me to shut up? Hoho, this guy! Do you even know who I am? Huh? Huh!? I am… ’

And that fat pig’s soul yammered and screamed on and on.

My head even grew cold with the pain as he started whining in earnest.

“I know who you are. You are an idiot who spitted your body with a sword, and became trapped in that sword after doing nothing but evil through your entire life.”

‘Yes! Who are you? Huh? And why doesn’t anyone help me!?’

“See, no one but I can hear your voice.”

‘So, what are you waiting for, guy! Go ahead and pull me out of this thing. If you save, you will be the savior of this country! You will be the benefactor of the kingdom!”

“Be the benefactor of a horny traitor dog, you mean,” I growled at the prince and his indecent shouting. “From now on, you speak only when spoken to, say nothing if I ask nothing.”

‘Do you dare to order me, Adrian Leonberger!?’

“I guess you haven’t figured out the situation, then. Go ahead, keep making noise, and I’ll just turn around, walk right out, and leave you here. Then you will have to rot beneath the palace for your entire sorry life, staring only at the backs of palace knights who can’t hear you talking even if you talked for a hundred days straight.”

It was a childish threat to make, but it worked wonders.

‘Oh no, no! Okay, okay. I’ll be quiet, just don’t go!’ the prince begged as he realized his situation.

It was natural for him to be so desperate, and it must have been terrible for him to exist all this time, alone and unheard, in a place where nothing much happened. I knew that sensation better than anyone, so I could fully understand Adrian's feelings. Still, just because I understood his loneliness did not mean that I sympathized with his situation. The harm had he had inflicted on this world in his short life was enormous. On a lesser level, he had made life difficult for the 'underprivileged class', as he had called them. He had insulted, assaulted, molested, and plainly tormented them. On a larger stage, he had ruined the lives of hundreds of knights and had destroyed the only hope the kingdom had for a more independent future.

Even after all those things, and being stuck in a sword for more than a year, the guy had not reflected on his actions and his personality at all. How can anyone sympathize with such a man? It might sound selfish and shameless for me to state this from within his body, but I believed it better for him to be stuck inside a sword instead of being unleashed upon the world. And no, I didn't want to return to things as they were. Looking at my body, I didn't want to go back to being a sword at that moment.

"Since when have you been in there?" I asked him, to gain a more factual understanding of the situation and the nature of our transference.

'I was swinging this sword, and then the fronts of my eyes turned all white, and when I woke up, I was inside the sword.'

His process exactly resembled my own when I had entered his body. 3333

"Did you see any strange or special signs, or experience unusual feelings?"

'No! I was just trapped in here, waiting for someone to come and help me.'

I asked a few more questions but gained very little concrete information from them.

'I don't know. It's been so long that I've been in here. I don't know what this is, or how this happened.'

He obviously knew nothing. The fact that we had fallen asleep and then awoke in different bodies, our souls which had been switched, the reason for such a thing happening: Adrian knew nothing at all. He had just woke up, the same idiot as always, in my body.

“You’re not really helpful.”

‘Uh… okay, you know, maybe that guy, the ambassador of the empire, knows something.’

What he said was truly unexpected.

‘See, that Marquis of Montpellier told me where the Dragon Slayer was, and told me how to get to it.’

Montpellier’s filthy name had sprung up from a truly unexpected source.

‘If I had the power of the Dragon Slayer, I would have been able to recover everything that I had lost after my father said I was a royal enemy.’

His words made me feel as if I had been whipped across the back.

“Tell me more, tell me everything.”

‘A few days before my accident, the Marquis of Montpellier came to me… wait guy, so, will you bring me out of here if I tell you all of this?’

“I’ll listen to you and think about it, so just say what you were about to say.”

The idiot spoke on then, talking about all the events for a long time. And when I had heard all his stories, I was wracked by outrageous laughter.

I kept laughing at the vanity and absurdity of it all, laughing so much that I became embarrassed. The stupid prince carefully asked me a question.

‘But who the hell are you anyway? I’ve never heard of a guy like you being in the royal family.’

“Oh, who am I?”

I pondered his question for a moment, being in his body as I was.

“I am just a simple shit-cleaner.”

‘What is that, guy? But you-‘

“My lord, your time is up!”

Before I could solve the final questions that haunted my mind, Nogisa’s call came from beyond the door.

“My lord, I’m coming in,”

It was a statement rather than a request, and the door swung open as the old knight and the palace knights came in.

“Put the sword back.”

I took turns looking at the knights, then at my body, and finally, let go of it.

‘Come now, wait! Wait!’

“I’m coming back soon.”

‘No! You promised, you promised!’ came Adrian’s urgent cry, but I had already turned away.

I guessed that it was beyond my ability to pull the first prince from my body, but it would surely not be so difficult to at least get him out of that dark room.

Of course, I had to pass the king’s test first.

* * *

Gwain’s mind swam with complicated considerations. After he had arrived at the palace, he had no idea what exactly his mood was. He had endured many hard days. All the while, he had believed there to be a strong king who would never yield before foreign powers – and loyal and wise nobles who followed this king. Gwain had imagined him and his comrades standing so proudly before that king.

The reality was a stark contrast to his imagined world.

Even though the king still sat on his throne, the imperial dog had acted as he pleased, and no one had disagreed.

There had been no loyal and wise nobles, as he had imagined. The people who he

had found were weak and succumbed before the prestige of the empire.

Even the king… even he was corrupted.

The imperial ambassador freely interfered in the domestic affairs of the kingdom, intimidating nobles before Gwain's very eyes. All the while, the king upon his throne did nothing.

When the ambassador had announced the unsealing of the Spire, the king had even rejoiced. As if he was a dog that had been thrown a bone from its master.

Gwain was able to grasp such things in his mind. It was indeed a tremendous change, to once more train wizards and employ the unsealed lore of the tower. Any king would be glad to gain such an opportunity to make his realm prosper.

It was in his heart that Gwain could not understand and tolerate the king's attitude.

Gwain had not broken his rings while vomiting blood to see the terrible sight of a weak man on the throne. No, he had wanted to be as strong as the king, for he had believed the man to be so.

But that was not the case.

Gwain had seen with his own eyes how delighted the king had been with the bones that the empire had so casually tossed his way. For a man who once loved the king, such images were disrespectful, irreverent ideas. He had tried to erase them from his mind, but that gaping portal of the true state of affairs could not be closed once it had opened in his brain. His comrades had also been silent.

Just by looking at their faces, Gwain knew that the same windows had been cut into their souls.

I should have died that day. If I had ended my life rather than breaking my rings… I would never have had to bear such a rotten heart as now beats inside my breast!

The first prince had looked over the walls of the first palace with a gloomy cast to his face and had then gone off, saying that there was something he had to do. He returned.

Prince Adrian's expression was hard as stone, as always, yet somehow it was harder

still.

“Your Highness, what happened?” greeted a palace knight with a graceful appearance and an anxious face.

Didn’t he say that his name was Carls Ulrich?

“Send someone to fetch the Marquis of Montpellier.”

“Highness?”

“I want to see him, now.”

When Carls Ulrich simply stood wide-eyed after the prince had given the order, it was repeated.

“Make sure he comes here right now.”

Not even the king could so carelessly treat the empire’s ambassador, yet the first prince was summoning the man as if he was his subordinate.

“Your Highness would like him to come, here?” Carls asked the First Prince, obviously having the same concerns as Gwain.

“Oh, he will come,” said the first prince without hesitation, “if he doesn’t want to die.”

Surprised by the fury and bluntness of such words, Carls Ulrich cast nervous glances around him, worried about who else had heard the prince’s words.

“Well,” Carls mumbled as his gaze fell on Gwain.

Gwain pretended to have heard nothing and watched as a butcher was carrying a slaughtered sheep by the hook in the capital’s distant streets.

One of the palace knights left the First Palace, and not long after that, he returned.

The ambassador of the empire had come with him.

The face of the ambassador, a man who could dare to challenge the king openly, was terrified.

“Carls,” the first prince softly said as the marquis entered, “close all the doors.”

‘Gdoof!’ came the heavy sound as the palace knights closed and barred the entrance to the First Palace.

“Well, Your Highness?” asked Montpellier as his pale face stared alternately at the sealed doors and the first prince.

“I will give you your last chance,” came the prince’s cold voice as he studied every line and crinkle upon the ambassador’s face.

“Your Highness, what are you saying?”

“What did you hide from me?”

The prince settled his hand on his sword’s pommel.

“What more do you know? Tell me everything.”

The first prince’s voice had grown even softer, sounding ever bloodier.

“Your Highness, I don’t know what Your Highness is talking about!”

“The royal sword.”

The imperial ambassador visibly stiffened at those words.

“Tell me what I was trying to do when I held the Dragon Slayer.”

CHAPTER 93
ANYWAY, I'M NOT A GUY (2)

'Duruuuk – duruuuk.'

One could imagine the Marquis of Montpellier's eyeballs making that sound as they turned to the closed door, then to the first prince, and then back to the door.

The sight of his eyeballs swiveling so clearly showed what type of thoughts were troubling his mind.

"It seems that you are still in doubt," the first prince quietly said as he stared at the imperial ambassador.

"Let me help you gain certainty."

'Swaank!' came the terrifying noise of the first prince drawing his sword, baring its blade to the world.

"Are the mists of hesitation clearing from your eyes now?"

The marquis did not answer – he just stumbled back from the prince in fear.

"Or are they still there?" the prince demanded as he strode toward Montpellier.

"It seems like I am about to sheath my sword in your skin."

The first prince wasn't just saying that he would at least cut an arm off the ambassador if no one stopped him.

"Your Highness!" the horrified palace knights cried as they made to step forward, intent on stopping their master. The Marquis of Montpellier moved before they had taken a single step.

'Duk,' came the sound of his knees slamming to the floor.

“It is a misunderstanding! Your Highness!” cried the imperial ambassador as he knelt before the prince.

“I was just taking care that my eyes and words did not reveal the relationship between Your Highness and me. I was not trying to disobey Your Highness’s orders!”

The palace knights’ mouths gaped open.

Even the monarchs of the kingdom had not dared go against imperial ambassadors. And yet here was the Marquis of Montpellier, a man who had been given absolute power by the emperor, kneeling before the first prince and begging for forgiveness!

It was a sight that not one person in the kingdom would ever have imagined seeing.

However, the first prince remained cool and uncaring in the face of such utter obeisance.

“A misunderstanding,” said the prince, his sword still out.

“Is it a misunderstanding; that you have tricked and deceived me?”

The ambassador started to swear greatly upon hearing those words.

“I will explain that as well, Your Highness,” the marquis said as he bent his waist forward, as servants are required to do when kneeling before their masters.

“But, this place has a lot of ears,” came the ambassador’s whisper.

‘Shuuck!’

The prince sheathed his sword with a blurred motion. However, he had not just sheathed the blade.

A thin red line appeared on the marquis’ neck after the sword had moved so quickly that it had been difficult to track its motion.

“Huh-uh?” the shocked marquis whimpered as he groped at his throat. As he saw the light trickle of blood, it seemed as if his soul had been sucked from his pale face.

“Next time, you will be belching up blood.”

The marquis nodded like a madman.

“Follow me,” said the first prince as turned about and headed for his private quarters. The marquis followed happily, like a dog who had been scolded instead of kicked.

“What the hell just happened?” asked one of the palace knights as they looked at one another and then scattered in all directions. Some went to guard the passage that the prince and the marquis had taken, while others took their posts on the southern, northern, eastern, and western sections of the First Palace.

Gwain and his comrades had observed the entire scene with blank stares.

“Had he wanted to show us this?” one of them asked, referencing the fact that the king always wilted under the attention of the ambassador, while the prince had made him kneel and treated him like a servant.

The men nodded, but Gwain disagreed with their conclusion. He knew that the first prince had not wanted to show off his prestige or power; his message was rather the opposite of that.

The first prince wanted the knights to realize that the royal family possessed no dignity and that the spirit of the kingdom had been quashed. He wanted to show them that cold and stark reality, and in so doing, make these broken knights reach their own conclusions and ask their own questions.

Even if their rings had not been broken, would the kingdom have been able to enter a golden new era?

“He is a powerful guy,” said Gwain as he chewed on his lower lip, “and I really don’t like it.”

Even though the other knights had reached different conclusions, they still nodded, for they all sympathized with Gwain’s words.

* * *

“Hey, now! So we’re alone, my dear marquis.”

The sword was touching the Marquis’ neck, and his mouth nervously twitched.

Occasionally, when I saw a slight lie in his eyes or noticed him try to become more comfortable with cold steel kissing his jugular, I unrelentingly put some power into my grip and gave the sword a little push.

And each time that I did that, the marquis screamed as if his throat would be cut.

“So, tell the truth.”

“I do, I do! I am telling the truth!”

The empire had long been seeking the sword of the kingdom, my body. However, it seemed that the royal family’s will was strong, and they had not given up Dragon Slayer – Instead, they gave up their knights and allowed the tower to be sealed.

That is why Montpellier had conceived of a secret way to get the sword out of the palace.

His plan had been absurd. He had been thinking of spiriting Dragon Slayer away like a common thief, stealing that most potent symbol of the Leonberger dynasty.

He had failed.

“Well, it was possible to break the magical barrier which had been doubled and tripled around the sword, but the problem was Dragon Slayer itself. If someone touched it, they died. Even precious wizards and knights died upon contact,” the marquis said as he looked at me.

I wasn’t so angered by what he told me. All those fearless people who had dared touch my body have already paid the ultimate price. When I had been awake, anyone who did not have Gruhorn’s – my friend’s – blood in their veins died the moment that they tried to wield me. That fact didn’t change even while I had slumbered. The only person who managed to get me got me buried into his guts.

That was why Montpellier had encouraged the prince. An idiot that could touch my body without dying and who would be willing to sell out the royal treasure that his family had kept for centuries was just what Montpellier had dreamed of. There had never been and would never be a better opportunity for the empire to steal a Dragon Slayer than by using Adrian Leonberger.

From the kingdom’s perspective, it was an unfortunate shame, but the empire must

have considered it to be a lucky eventuality, indeed. But the imperials did not know – they did not know the absolute idiocy of the foolish agent they had chosen; they did not know Adrian Leonberger.

How could they have known? Meanwhile, the entire kingdom must've hoped that the stupid prince would push a royal sword into his stomach. Thanks to the fact that he did, the marquis failed, and the king strengthened his guard of Dragon Slayer more than ever before. All the secret tunnels and hidden rooms had made Dragon Slayer quite inaccessible. Considering the attitudes of Nogisa and the palace knights, I doubt they would even have given up my body to Maximilian.

It was all so absurd.

It had been an idiot who had tried to steal my body, and it was that exact idiocy that had, in the end, saved it.

If Adrian had just been a little less stupid, I would have woken up in the damned palace of Burgundy instead of here, in his body.

"So, what were you trying to do with the Dragon Slayer?"

The marquis almost stuttered as he answered my question.

"I don't know. I had just received the mission when the former ambassador had failed, and I also tried to accomplish it. I don't know the exact reason- Hac! Ugh, ugh, really! Please believe me!"

I increased my pressure upon the blade, and blood started to flow from the marquis' neck.

"Well! I had only heard the tale that the Dragon Slayer might possess similar powers to the Four Wonders of His Majesty, the Emperor of Burgundy!"

I had stiffened.

"What did you say?"

"The former ambassador, he had said that there is a possibility the royal Leonberger sword is an artifact that is as powerful as the Four Wonders of the empire, so it must be obtained!"

“The Four Wonders?”

“Well, it is… Your Highness! Please take away your sword!” the marquis begged me, but I did not listen to his pleas, having more important things on my mind.

“Is it possible that it refers to the sword, shield, armor , and helmet used by the emperor of Burgundy?”

The marquis nodded, his face now so very near to weeping.

“Yes, that’s right- Agh! Highness! Highness! It hurts! Please remove the sword, please…”

As the marquis had wished, I took the sword away from his neck.

“Gah! Thank you, Your Highness,” he said as rubbed his neck. I hadn’t thought of the marquis when I had taken away my blade. Instead, I was no longer able to control my laughter and had feared that I would stab the point into his gullet when I started laughing. And I laughed like crazy.

“Well? Your Highness?”

The marquis retreated from me a bit when he saw me in that state. He seemed to think that I had lost my mind, no longer able to control my anger. His face was one that showed his terror, for he was afraid that my anger would be taken out on him. The truth was that I could not stop laughing. I bent my back and grabbed my belly as I laughed and laughed.

It was all so funny, and I could no longer bear to keep my mirth contained.

“Ah, ah… I am going crazy,” I said as I recovered my senses after a long while. But soon, the laughter came on again.

The way the chubby pig made the empire lose their one shot at me! And the Four Wonders! Those crude old things?

“Well… uh… Your Highness?” The marquis trembled as he looked at me, and I could read in his gaze that he thought me a madman.

“Sorry, sorry… I do apologize, my dear marquis. It’s just so funny!”

After letting the laughter run its course, I cleared my throat and my thoughts.

It was not difficult to guess what the Four Wonders were.

A sword with half its blade missing.

A shield with its top cut off.

A suit of armor that was missing a pauldron.

A helm with broken horns.

It was the arms and armor of old heroes that had existed four centuries ago, and even before that.

They were ancient objects that had deep scars, having suffered such damage in their many battles.

“Those old things… they are similar to the Dragon Slayer?”

I started laughing again because it was all so very ridiculous. I was sure that the imperial ambassador knew so better than anyone else. I knew that he knew, because why else would he have risked so much to send Adrian after me?

Those things are amazing!? They are considered on par with my body!?

“It has been a long time that I have laughed so, without a care in the world.”

The marquis inadvertently chuckled at my words.

“Go on,” I said.

He hesitated and then continued. However, his story wasn’t special. The marquis also knew nothing.

“This is all I know,” Montpellier stated at the end. He kept glancing back at the door – as if he wished to flee at any moment. I stepped forward and swung my sword in deathly silence.

“Ah?” the marquis gasped before realizing what had happened.

‘Tuk,’ came the sound of something falling to the floor. The marquis looked down, his eyes stretching wide.

The little finger of his left hand, which had been attached mere seconds before, lay there.’

“Aah… Waaaaaaah, wooooohaaah!” the marquis screamed as he looked at the bloody stump from where his digit had been severed. His scream did not last long, for I opened the door while he stared at me, his eyes filled with pain and fear.

“That is the price you pay for trying to use me.”

As things stood, I should have cut something from his neck and never turned back to watch him fall. No matter how much he loved his empire, that was no excuse for him trying to deceive a Leonberger.

Still, thanks to the scheming of the marquis, I had been able to enter the body of the prince. He had sinned, yet, he had still done the things I had told him to do, and he had done them well. I judged his punishment to be adequate, though, of course, the marquis would not agree.

“It will really be your neck the next time.”

Montpellier only nodded his head. I wasn’t sure whether he had truly understood my warning. Honestly, I didn’t even want to know. If he hadn’t grasped the direness of my warning, he would inevitably pay the price.

I already held my dagger to marquis’ throat, and I didn’t even need to be near him. He didn’t know that, of course. He couldn’t dream of how close he walked to death day by day.

The elven woman, Gunn, was his personal shadow, and she watched him even when he slept, observing his every move for a full twenty-four hours.

You can imagine that a woman from that bloody race of elves wouldn’t even so much as lift an eyebrow if she was ordered to slice his throat.

* * *

Carls entered fearfully after the Marquis of Montpellier had left.

“The ambassador’s hand was bloody.”

“Oh, okay? I hope he didn’t smear blood over any of my paintings?” came my casual reply.

Carls sighed and ceased his pretense.

“His little finger had been severed.”

“Oh? That sounds like a big deal.”

“Your Highness,” said Carls, “I have no intention of speaking about it. From the ambassador’s attitude, I could tell that there exists a relationship between Your Highness and the ambassador that I am unaware of.”

The knight’s expression grew more serious.

“I just… I just want to know what happened to Your Highness out there, up north.”

I silently regarded Carls, waiting for him to speak his mind.

“And what Your Highness is going to do in the future?”

“What do you plan to do if I tell you?”

“I cannot trust my body to someone if I don’t know the aspirations of the person who will be its master.”

I burst into laughter as I heard Carl’s words. In the past, I had acted as a member of the royal family could act, so Carls had stepped back and held his peace. Only now did he seem to seriously consider following me.

Ah, today is a day that brings many new ways in which to laugh!

Still, I did not laugh for long.

“Once again, I think of becoming king.”

Carls laughed.

“So, it won’t take that long to get back to work.”

It was a more likely prospect than before, even if the king hated me. Carls’s face showed no doubt, for he clearly did believe that I would become the king. I knew him for an honest and loyal man, for he had guarded my vacant palace for the entire time that I had been gone.

“The north is cold, Carls Ulrich.”

“I will purchase a fur coat for winter, Your Highness.”

I had told him that I would not tarry in the capital for long, leaving soon, but that had not shaken his resolve.

And he was not alone.

Beside Carls, all the palace knights who had guarded my vacant palace had sworn their allegiance to me.

And so, I gained the loyalty of some royal palace knights, who were loyal to no other prince.

And they had sworn to serve me, even if their armor would no longer be engraved with the royal emblem of the Dragon Slayer.

* * *

I had guessed that the king would call me right away and tell me of the test, yet he did not send for me for a long time.

During that period, many nobles came to me. I met with none of them.

No matter how much Prince Adrian had been reviled before, the nobles had somehow lost all their hate, becoming very polite and figuring that I would be the next king.

It seems that the bait of the Spire had been quite tasty, and so all the fish came swimming.

“He takes too much time,” I complained. Two weeks had already passed since I had

arrived in the capital. I had accomplished my purpose and was really not in the mood of waiting for the king's task forevermore.

So, I went to king myself.

"Tsa," Lionel Leonberger clucked his tongue when he saw me entering, sparing no dignity for his eldest son.

I didn't keep him long in waiting, though, for I had work awaiting me.

"Tell me what I need to do."

He then informed me of my task, his face remaining passive. Still, at first glance, I sensed a subtle sense of victory behind that mask-like face of his. That did not last long.

"Oh? It's not so difficult, then."

The king's expression hardened as I smiled at him.

"I don't think you understood what I just-"

"I understand completely."

The king looked like he would have a seizure after I had interrupted him.

"Is that all?" I asked, not caring about his mood or any type of seizure he might experience.

"That's all."

Perhaps, I had expected him to look more worried, but the king had replied firmly.

"Well, it won't be long until I'm back."

Much to my disappointment, the king's test would not be difficult – it would not even be a hassle.

Rather, it would be a nice and scenic trip, for it was a mission related to my very essence.

* * *

After I had met with the king, I immediately left the capital. We traveled on the royal road, heading north.

“I have a job to do, so I’m going to take care of it. You head north,” I told the lords of the north, and they did not question me. They just followed my orders. The same counted for the rest of my party. Arwen remained silent, and Adelia had never been outgoing anyway. The once-secret and now broken knights, who had only recently taken up the sword again, were absolutely not in a mood to hold deep conversations with me.

All who remained to talk with were my new followers, the former palace knights.

“Your Highness, why aren’t you heading north?” Carls asked.

“Because we have to go west,” came my profound response.

“What do we mean to do in the west?” was Carls’ next question.

What is there to do in the west?

“I need to meet someone.”

And I had to meet them if I wanted to pass the king’s test.

“Who are we to meet?”

“Dwarves.”

I had no reason to head to Winter Castle.

No, I was going to the Dwarven Kingdom.

CHAPTER 94
YOU CAN'T DO IT WITH A BARE MOUTH (1)

We took a squad of Balahard Rangers with us and headed west.

After three days, we reached a wasteland with cracked, reddish soil.

After four days in the desert sun, a huge fortress appeared on the horizon, constructed from blocks of red stone.

"We have arrived on the windswept plains before Galbaram Fortress, the castle city!" Jorden, the ranger announced from the lead. At his words, I halted and took in the sight of the fortress. It had been donated by the dwarves to honor their friendship with the kingdom. Four hundred years later, it still guarded over these barren western lands.

The only difference between then and now was that the masterpieces the dwarven masons had worked hard to create had all been reformed into horrible parodies of their former grandeur under human hands.

Private domiciles and all manner of other buildings had been recklessly constructed around the fortress, their many disorderly terraced walls and precarious spires breaking the seamless dwarven symmetry and making the entire city appear almost ugly.

"It's messy," I said. I knew that if the dwarves saw the fortress which they had donated in its current state, they would jump out of their beards in fear.

It was all as I had expected.

* * *

"The dwarves are not here."

The king had clearly stated that a dwarven diplomatic mission was residing in Galbaram Fortress.

However, the head of the citadel and commander of the Western Legion informed me that the dwarves had left.

When I asked the reason for their departure, I was told of quite the spectacle: The dwarven diplomats had left in a huff because it had become too painful for them to see the changed shape of Galbaram.

The commander looked embarrassed, but I just laughed. I was surprised that the dwarves had even entered the fortress in the first place. It seemed that even after four hundred years, the stubborn nature of craftsdwarves had not changed.

“If they have not gone back to their holds, then where are they now?”

The commander stared at me. I had asked this of him so casually that he found it very strange. I understood his concerns – anyone would be embarrassed for his sake if they heard that an official diplomatic delegation had left for such a petty reason.

Well, I understood, at least.

For me, it was the natural way for dwarves to behave. They were a stubborn people, not willing to betray the sanctity of their craftdwarfship, not even on the battlefield.

“If Your Highness heads two days west of Galbaram, there stands a small hill. Their delegation has been sleeping there since last month,” said the legion commander, then asked if there was anything else he could do to help me.

I asked him to prepare some supplies and furnish me with a guide who could lead us to the area of the wasteland where the dwarves were staying.

“I will prepare all by tomorrow,” he said, and yet his face remained gloomy.

He did not show much enthusiasm for my mission, even if the gains would be enormous if we managed to resume our long-severed friendship with the dwarves.

It was natural, yes, it was so natural.

I learned that no one had even had a proper conversation with these dwarven envoys, even while they had visited the capital on multiple occasions. If someone else had faced the same challenge I now faced on this mission, they probably wouldn’t have gotten motivated much.

In other words, I could say with certainty that I did not have any concrete expectations for success. The king believed I would fail, of course. Regardless, I didn't care much what he thought.

I took a full day off, regaining my physical strength after the journey. I then gathered my party and posed a very important question to them:

"Who among you is the best drinker?"

They all looked at me with confused expressions upon hearing such an unexpected question.

Then a few of them rolled their eyes and looked at one another. A strange tension filled the air, a tension that did not fit the situation for such an absolutely innocent question.

It was a ranger rather than a knight who broke the silence and the tense stares.

"In Winter Castle, we say that the best drinker by the week is Jordan, and if Jordan drinks, he drinks all week," he said, and Jordan nodded vehemently. A group of other rangers heard Jordan being praised, so they stepped up and shoved in before him to get my attention.

"I am least certain that I hold my drink better than Jordan!"

"Well, I must say, I've never really been drunk, so who knows how much I can drink?"

"Hah, well, I haven't had to eat a bite of food my whole life, because no matter how much I drink, I don't get a bit drunk. Been living off beer for all my years now."

The rangers outdid themselves to be noticed, talking aloud about how well they had been drinking all their lives.

"We palace knights don't drink with just anyone, but when we do drink…" Carls began, entering the contest.

I did not know what a qualification in the consumption of alcoholic beverages had to with being a palace knight, but Carls Ulrich pressed on nonetheless.

Almost everyone in the group had come forward to press their claims -even a man

who considered me his enemy, Gwain, was trying to convince me of his alcoholic prowess with some determination.

Yet, it wasn't just men who had entered the contest.

'Click, chuck,' came the sound of sabatons striking the cobbles, and when I opened my eyes, a woman stood before me.

"Arwen?"

"I don't enjoy it, but I know I can drink more than them."

The men furrowed their brows as they heard her voice – a voice so confident amid the sudden tumult that my question had created. Arwen's words seemed to have touched the men's pride in the wrong place.

"Well, this is almost everyone. Adelia, would you like to join?" I asked.

Adelia shook her head, saying that she had never so much as taken a sip of alcohol.

"Then you don't know your limit?"

Most of my party had already thrown their names into the hat, so I told Adelia to join those who considered themselves to be the superior boozers.

She did not refuse, clearly curious about this thing called alcohol that she had never tried.

'Klaap!' I clapped my hands together as I gathered everyone around me.

The soldiers of Galbaram Fortress trotted over, carrying a few kegs.

"Let's see," I said as I opened the head of the largest barrel that the soldiers had brought.

"Ah, it smells strong!"

The liquor scent filled the air, so potent that one could almost get drunk just by sniffing.

“Your Highness, what is the nature of this situation?” Carls asked as he stepped forward.

“I have to decide who is the greatest inebriate in our party,” I answered casually.

“Right now?” Carls asked as he reeled back, finding my statement to be absurd.

“Why? Aren’t you confident? If you lack confidence, you fail already.”

“I shall bet my honor as a palace knight that I’m confident!” Carls replied with a bright face.

“You’re not even a palace knight anymore,” I pointed out.

“Still, that is how confident I am.”

As I spoke with Carls, Jordan spoke up from behind him.

“Shall we just get started, then?”

Everyone had already filled their tankards, everyone but Carls.

“It has already started over there,” I pointed out as I motioned to a corner. The entire group turned their heads.

Gwain, ever gloomy, had become even more depressed after visiting the capital. He was already emptying his tankard with a face that looked like all the troubles of the world had been heaped upon it.

“I can’t lose,” he stated after he had emptied it.

“Your first cup must be emptied at once!” I declared. The men poured their drink down their throats at once.

Arwen grabbed her tankard with a refined motion, emptying it at once.

‘Glug glug glug.’

She then scooped another drink from a keg and poured it down her throat.

The men were motivated by her head-start and downed their next helping.

“You don’t have to drink fast, but you have to drink a lot,” I explained the rules. No one in that hall had heard my words. It was only Adelia who timidly sipped hers up, her eyes locked with mine.

“Take only one tankard at a time, and count how many you knock back.”

“Shall we write it down, Your Highness?”

“There is no need to do so. Just keep a rough guess in your head,” I said to those of my party who were not participating, and they started keeping count of how many tankards each participant downed.

“So strong! It feels so good!”

“Hey, who spilled my other cup? I kept it just here. Who spilled it?”

The participants started to go at it in earnest, some bumping their cups together in celebration before downing them.

The soldiers of the Western Legion bowed their heads in amazement when they saw me looking at them.

I order them to bring more kegs the moment it looked like we would be running out of booze.

* * *

The years hung heavily on the commander of the Western Legion. The dwarven nobles who were set to bring enormous wealth to the kingdom through the establishment of diplomatic channels had departed, giving absurd excuses.

The commander pondered whether he had been negligent in treating these envoys. He believed that the kingdom had now suffered a great loss due to his diplomatic ineptitude.

He had been wondering about how he could smooth things over with the dwarven delegation and reopen diplomatic channels when the kingdom sent their fourth envoy to Galbaram.

However, this time the envoy was the eldest son of the royal family, well known for being a troublemaker.

Still, the first prince's notoriety was not the same as it had been before. The commander had ears of his own, and he had heard of the effective defense that the first prince had fielded in the north.

However, it might just have been rumors about the bravery of the first prince. The commander didn't think that the young man could find the correct carrot-on-a-stick to convince the tricky dwarven envoys to come back.

"I want a guide and fifty kegs of your finest liquors."

The commander had simply replied that he understood. The thought processes of the prince were quite obvious, for he had obviously also heard the rumors that the dwarves were notorious drinkers.

There was no great expectation in the mind of the commander that the prince could succeed. He himself had already obtained the finest alcohols from across the realm and gifted them to the dwarven diplomats several times. That alone had not aided the talks, so the first prince would probably also fail.

The prince had not asked for the finest silken rice wines – he had rather demanded the cheaper liquor that the soldiers drank.

Still, the commander had prepared all the kegs, as he had been asked to.

Great was his surprise when the first prince had instead used the liquor to host a drinking game for his own retinue, instead of offering the kegs to dwarven envoys!

It was absurd.

He had heard that the prince was no longer indolent and ignorant, but it seems that nothing had changed.

The commander could only cluck his tongue, for he did not understand why the king hadn't sent him some competent envoys. Perhaps the kingdom had given up on re-establishing its former friendship with the dwarves?

The commander took a stroll as he considered this chaos, but then a knight ran up to

him and gave a report.

“Commander Sir! You should come at once, if only for a while!”

When the commander asked the knight why he was so urgent and panicked, he was met with a dumb stare.

Still, the commander decided to hurry to the hall where the prince and his servants held their little party.

Royal blood was royal blood, after all.

‘Badang! Klank! Bang!’

The commander was startled by the big bang that he had heard and so hastily entered the hall.

“Noooo! What kind of guy are… is you? Huh!?”

“I fall alone here, ah, fell alone. Alone!”

A man with a ruddy face was lying on the floor, babbling nonsense.

The men standing around him were laughing and giggling.

“Whats are you talkin bout? Hah!? Therse are twenny nine glassesess riiight here!” came a drunkard’s drawl.

“Oh well, that’s what you say, but I counted them exactly. You had twenty-two tankards. The one you just drank had been your twenty-third,” came the calm appraisal of one of the referees.

“Huh? Hey! This guy here, he’s trying to trick us!”

The men raised their voices as their tongues wagged, a few of them matching the commander’s gaze.

“Huh! I missed you so, John. Why did you go first, John?! Hah?”

“Okay, okay, don’t panic now, my child. If you… if you do, I too must… Aaaahhh. Haah,

why my child? Why?"

Some men were hugging each other and shedding tears.

And there, to one side of the chaos, was the first prince.

"That one and that one… eliminated. Don't give them any more. Tcha," the first prince instructed, and then clucked his tongue, acutely observing the drunken depravity of his men.

"First, a headcount. Jordan, Carls, Arwen, Gwain, and Adelia are still in it."

"She's just been holding her cup and… doing that, Your Highness."

"Okay? Well, she's still lively, at least."

The commander now knew his ideas were as innovative as those of the first prince. He chuckled as he admired what Prince Adrian was doing and then gave a cough to get his notice.

"Your Highness, what are you doing?" he asked.

"It is exactly what it looks like," came the prince's response.

Even though the entire scene was shameful, and even while the commander felt ashamed, the first prince's face was a study in shamelessness.

"Didn't Your Highness say that you are leaving to meet the delegation the day after tomorrow?"

The commander wondered whether it was wise to get everyone so sopping drunk ahead of a critical mission. The first prince didn't budge an inch – he was so casual.

"Yes, so? I am conducting an examination before we meet the dwarven delegation."

"What exactly is-"

"If dwarves are drinking, then – and only then – can you change their minds."

The commander sighed.

“The envoys from the capital have come here many times. I myself had offered the dwarves the silkiest of wines this past month, but their attitude had not changed in the slightest.”

The first prince clucked his tongue at the commander’s words.

“You have wasted a month’s supply of fine wine, then.”

The first prince looked at the commander as if the man had not a lick of common sense and then continued explaining.

“Dwarves prefer drunken friends, instead of gifts of drink.”

“What does Your Highness mean by that?”

“You can’t just give them the stuff. They want to drink with you,” the first prince said, then spoke to one of the referees. “Oh, eliminate Carls over there. His eyes have begun to roll in their sockets.”

The former palace knight was furious and started to scream that he was not drunk.

“You bumped a barrel, Carls. You’re out.”

“Your majesty, the dwarves haven’t even spoken whole sentences when they were here,” the commander continued.

“Oh, and you think that that’s their basic state?”

In the background, Carls was shouting that it was all so unfair as he shook his head this way and that way.

The first prince observed this, clucked his tongue, and turned back to the commander.

“Dwarves don’t speak long words unless they are among friends. And the fastest way to become friends with dwarves,” the first prince stretched out his hand to show off the drunken chaos around him, “is to pour, drink and die with them.”

The commander looked at the first prince with some embarrassment, and the prince then rose from his seat.

“Hey! Let him go!”

The call was urgent, and the commander turned his head. A woman was staring at a table with her head bowed.

“Oh shit!”

The commander watched as the prince ran toward the table, and then a creepy voice filled the hall.

“Why did you do that to me…”

The voice sounded like someone weeping.

“Adelia! No!”

At that moment, a red and yellow light shone from the woman’s eyes.

* * *

The drinking contest came to an abrupt halt due to the uproar Adelia had caused.

At least by that time, it had been roughly decided who had the right talents to meet with the dwarves,

Arwen, Jordan, and Gwain were the only ones who had survived the drinking with a semblance of honor.

And among the three of them, Arwen stood the most firm.

Even though she had drunk much, her face color had surprisingly remained unchanged. If it was not for the sharp tang of booze wafting from her, one could believe that she didn’t drink at all.

Jordan and Gwain had started to show some signs of intoxication, but they had held on to the end.

Carls was also fine but definitely excluded from the list. It was known that the dwarves hated those who used mana while drinking, and he had done so.

Adelia was also excluded. She had inherited many talents from her ancestors, but somehow couldn't hold her booze!

She had gotten drunk after her first tankard and had suffered terrible effects.

I hadn't thought about what would happen if she got drunk with those terrible traits of hers.

The price for my ignorant negligence had been terrible, for not even [Poetry of Submission] had worked to stop her drunken riot. And to face such a rampage from a Sword Master was a fierce event, one not easily halted.

Thanks to her rage, all the furniture in that opulent hall had been broken, and many bruises were left on the faces of knights who had tried to subdue her. I had to go to great lengths to finally calm the storm that was Adelia.

Bluntly: Everyone agreed that it was good fortune that no one had died.

It was absolutely something that none of us wanted to witness again.

"In all cases and at all times, don't let even a drop of alcohol touch your tongue."

"I'm sorry, Your Highness," Adelia apologized with a bowed head.

I could not really blame her, as it had been my doing, but I stressed my point multiple times: "Adelia, never get drunk."

When the contest was over, I told my party why I had hosted it. I told those of them who weren't under the care of doctors, at least.

"Alcohol retention is an essential skill for when one deals with dwarves. That is why you have to drink the day or days before you visit them."

Arwen and Jordan were naturally jolly about the mission. Gwain, though, he surprised me. A man like him, who sharpened his blade so that he could one day gain his revenge on me, had still volunteered to meet the dwarves.

When I asked him why he did, he did not answer. I took my three drinkers and an assorted group of others to help us. We left the fortress with three wagons that were stacked to their sides with kegs and barrels.

“There it is. The camp of the dwarven folk is just around that hill there,” a western soldier – who had been guiding us – said as he pointed out a hill in the distance.

“Good. Everyone, unpack here and set up camp.”

I left Carls and the others behind. I picked out only Arwen, Jordan, and Gwain, who had proven themselves, and ordered each of them to steer a wagon around the hill.

And there it was: A camp filled with dwarves. Their stocky figures surrounded a campfire. Even if they noticed our party’s arrival, they did not so much as turn their heads to look at us.

But my eyes could see the truth of the matter.

These stout liquor enthusiasts were keeping their ears pricked as they heard the sound of booze sloshing in barrels as the wagons trundled along.

“Halt here,” I ordered as the wagons rolled into the entrance of the camp.

I jumped from a wagon, carrying a keg on my shoulder. We went straight to the bonfire and plopped down among the seated dwarves.

The dwarves, who were smoking from their pipes, turned to me.

As I met their gazes, I uncorked the barrel. The tingling scent of its contents slammed into our noses as it spread itself through the dry air of that wasteland.

I laughed as I saw the dwarves unwittingly clearing their throats and moving their mouths in desire.

“Let’s empty one keg first!”

CHAPTER 95
YOU CAN'T DO IT WITH A BARE MOUTH (2)

The five dwarves gathered around the fire stared at me. With confidence in my step, I tapped liquor into a wooden tankard I had brought and handed it to one of them.

The dwarf took it from me and then gave me a pointed stare.

I met his gaze, brought my own tankard to my mouth, and drained its contents.

'Glag glag,'

I then wiped my mouth with my sleeve in an exaggerated fashion.

'Gulp,' the dwarf swallowed his own drink in one go.

When I had emptied about three cups with him in a row, I made sure that the other dwarves, who had been looking at me with thirsty eyes, all got their own cup-fulls.

That was the beginning. The dwarves drank like crazy, knocking back tankard after tankard without a care in the world.

The liquor that remained quickly ran out.

I motioned for one of the wagons waiting in the distance to approach. The dwarves all deeply swallowed when they saw an entire wagon stacked with barrels. However, their desire only showed on their faces for the briefest of moments as they quickly took up their stern countenances once more,

Still, while pretending to be all serious, their eyes were constantly moving as they saw all those kegs on a carriage. While their expressions remained stern and stubborn, their body language showed the frankness of their thirst.

Four hundred years ago or now: Dwarves never change.

A smile came to my lips, reflecting the happiness dwelling within my heart.

“As you can see, there is plenty of alcohol, so you can all drink as much as you want.”3333

The dwarves glanced at one another, and then one of them stepped up and handed my tankard back to me.

That did in no way mean that they planned to stop drinking. Each of them pulled their personal wooden cup from their bags. These were not like the common wooden tankards that any prepared traveler would carry with them. They were almost uselessly large and very beautifully carven.

My small cup looked like a sickly little specimen when compared to the grandeur of theirs.

“Hmmm,” I mused as I watched them almost scurrying to the wagons and then lowering the kegs from the side, one or two at a time. Each of them claimed his personal barrel, sat down on a keg, and started drinking.

That was what happened.

* * *

During my contest, it had taken twenty men to empty ten barrels before they became too drunk to drink more. There were only five dwarves, and they had already gone through ten barrels, which equated to a single wagonload’s worth of booze. Even then, they weren’t drunk, and they weren’t entirely happy.

“Ach, there’s only twenty barrels left now!” one of them complained, bemoaning the dwindling liquor supply.

That was the first word any of the dwarves had spoken after a full day’s drinking. After that, their mouths stayed shut. Another day passed, and the dwarves started drinking slower than the previous day – as if they were afraid of depleting their source of intoxication. Even if the dwarves had slowed things down, the drinking had long since become too harsh for the humans to bear. It was so brutal that a veteran ranger, who had endured the fiercest of battles against the orcs for days on end, had slipped away from the party. He had muttered some excuse of hunting a wild beast that could prove a nuisance.

Where was the man who had been so eager to show the dwarves a real party, a

‘weeklong’ party as he had put it?

After leaving the camp, Jordan had not returned for a full day.

I completely sympathized with his cowardice. Right now, I would also run away if I could.

Foremost on my mind was my desire to run for the hills and escape from the dwarves. Escape from the king’s test and from this camp that reeked with the disgusting stench of alcohol.

The situation was no different for Gwain.

He dared not flee due to his stubborn pride, but the rate at which he was tilting his tankard was slowing down. His eyes had become unfocused.

Arwen was the only human that looked okay.

Her white face had a reddish cast to it, yet her eyes remained clear, and her posture unaffected.

“Hoh,” one of the dwarves gaped at her, for they all greatly admired her fortitude. They lifted their cups into the air in a toast, and Arwen joined them in their salute as she lifted her glass.

Another day passed in such a fashion.

Of Jordan, who had left camp hunting some beast that might not exist, there was no sign.

Gwain was loudly snoring where he had passed out on the ground, and Arwen, unlike the previous day, was getting drunk, groaning from time to them, and now having a slumped posture. 3333

There were only fives barrels of booze left, and the dwarves had begun to ration their intake desperately.

The pace had been pretty hard for me to keep up with, and I had become quite drunk in the end.

As I was fighting the drunken haze that just made me want to close my eyelids, Arwen started speaking.

'Your Highness, do you… know something?"

I hoped that if I didn't answer her, she wouldn't continue talking.

"The first time I swore allegiance to Your Highness… there was only despair. I had thought then: 'Arwen Kirgayen, your life has ended.'"

It was clear that she had, somehow, become drunk. Her speech was slurred, and she seemed to have forgotten about the dwarves that listened to her every word.

"But I don't think that now," she said, and my eyes took her in after such a frank expression. I felt strange inside.

I turned my head and saw the dwarves carefully sipping from their cups. Their eyes were turned toward the last remaining barrel, the night sky, or the bonfire, but I knew that their ears were focused solely on my knight and me.

'Hoh… '

'They are young. I once had such times as well.'

By boosting my hearing with mana, I could hear what they whispered to one another.

'Quiet you. I can't hear the woman and the boy's voices.'

"If it weren't for Your Highness, I would never have felt the brisk northern winds. If it weren't for Your Highness, how could I ever have had the chance to stare at myself while upon the boundary between life and death? I can only be grateful and thankful."

Arwen stared so intently at me.

Even in the mists of my drunkenness, her eyes twinkled like stars that were shining right at me.

'Oh hoh!' I heard a dwarf whisper again.

‘Now they’re so quiet!’

After she had stared at me for a long time, she suddenly jumped up. She staggered, almost falling forward, but rather knelt before me on her knee.

‘Your Highness, this Arwen Kirgayen gives her entire life to you…”

Arwen, her head still bowed, paused, and there were no words for a while.

Except for the dwarven whispers, of course.

‘What, her entire lifetime? And what’s a highness?’

‘Why are you even talking?’

‘Yes, be quiet, old man – we might miss the main point of their exchange.’

‘What, old man? You’re so young that you’re still blue in the face!’

‘Hah! Are you proud of being old, then?’

I tried hard to ignore the ever-noisier dwarves, finally getting from my seat as I looked pleasantly at Arwen.

She had fallen asleep – still on one knee and with her head bowed.

Still, I wanted to hold on and stay awake, but then, it seemed that I had reached my limit.

I sank down beside Arwen and hugged her with my arm, drunk and completely annoyed with myself.

“Haghum,” a dwarf coughed as he approached, pointing to one of their carriages when he realized that I wanted to make Arwen comfortable on one of the wagons we had brought from Galbaram.

“Would you ever put your mother or wife to sleep on such a wagon? How can you even think of using it? Let us put her in our carriage.”

I did not reject the dwarf’s offer. The carriages used by dwarves were no ordinary

ones. No matter what the dwarven race makes, they always make it with both functional beauty and beautiful function – Even if it was only a wooden cup or a wagon.

I didn't know for sure, but from what I knew, I believed that their carriages were comfortable, as if the dwarves were traveling in their homes.

It would be good for Arwen, drunk as she was, to rest well until she awoke.

As I lifted the flap to enter the carriage, I considered the scene before me. It looked as if an entire house had been shrunk and mounted on wheels.

I helped Arwen to a bed that stood on one side.

"Hmmm," she groaned with a frown, for the beds of dwarves were as short as they themselves. Still, she quickly curled her legs up and found a comfortable posture.

It didn't seem too uncomfortable a place for her to rest.

As I stared at Arwen, the realization suddenly came to me that I had never truly spoken with her. It was already a year since she had entered my service, and we had fought together on the battlefield dozens of times. The same went for Adelia, but she had actually been with me since I woke up.

However, in all that time, I have never tried to figure out what kind of persons they were, how their minds functioned. I had just taken it for granted that they stood by my side.

I watched Arwen as she slept. I took in the scars on the back of her hands, on her neck, and across her fair skin.

She had always followed me, and she had never looked back.

I had forced her into taking an oath of allegiance. At that moment, I felt truly sorry for not taking care of her properly.

"Tcha."

I gave a last glance at Arwen and stepped from the carriage.

“Come, and sit down,” the dwarves beckoned me as I stepped outside.

I saw Gwain some distance off, sprawled across the ground. It seemed that the consideration of the dwarves to offer their beds had not been extended to him.

No one had so much as glanced at the man who had laid there – passed out.

I gave a last look at Gwain and then sank down by the fire after one of the dwarves had led me to it.

“You the first one or the second one?” one of the dwarves asked, a hint of terror creeping into his voice.

I remained silent, so he continued.

“I’m asking if you’re the one who they hail as the return of the prodigal king, or if you’re the one who grew up surrounded by precious things while doing strange things in dark corners.”

Only then did I understand and so answered his question.

“First.”

“I thought as much.”

“What do you know?” I politely demanded.

“Even if I pretend to flatter, you’ll see the lies in my worn eyes as if dirt had been smeared into them. Still, I recognized you well enough, for you have the aura of a wild dog that wanders across the plains, just like the first prince is said to be.”

I frowned at such words, not knowing whether to accept them as a compliment or an insult.

“Will you show me the sword,” the dwarf asked, caring little for courtesy as he stretched out his hand. His gaze was directed at Twilight, which was scabbarded next to my waist.

I unbuckled the sword and handed it to the dwarf, who unsheathed it.

“What is this child’s name?”

“To me, it is Twilight of Dawn, yet to its creator, Twilight of Dusk.”

An admiring light shone in the dwarf’s eyes.

‘It is a good sword, and it has a good name.”

It was very generous praise to hear from the mouth of a dwarf, for when they appraised and evaluated things, they were strict and stingy.

I felt proud – as if the dwarf had praised me personally.

The master smith had forged Twilight by giving up his very soul, and it was a very precious weapon to me.

“Please cherish this child,” the dwarf said, his voice sounding as if it welled up from the deepest depths of true emotion.

“This child’s fate will never be one of light.”

I corrected my posture and suddenly felt gloomy. Just as elves would never speak lightly of destiny, so too a dwarf was always deadly serious when he spoke of the fate of a sword.

If a dwarf such as the one before me had spoken about Twilight’s fate, it meant that he had seen something. It also meant that the dwarf was no ordinary dwarf.

There aren’t many dwarves who know how to read the fate of a sword.

Among the dwarven race, such individuals, who could glimpse the fate of a sword so quickly, were called meisters.

“Are you a meister?”

The dwarf gave me a peculiar look. Something had flashed across his face, an expression that had neither been negative nor positive.

“Surely not…” If my guess was correct, then this dwarf was far more important than a mere meister.

“No way, are you a Prima Meister?”

They were the master of the masters, rare beings who could read even the memory of swords, an ability that stretched far beyond a vague feeling of its fate. To give a better idea as to the class of a Prima Meister is to say that they are to dwarves as Elder High Elves are to the elves.

“Nice to meet you, Kingslayer.”

Kingslayer was one of my titles after I had defeated the Warlord, so as I had recognized the Prima Meister, so too did he recognize me.

I had come here to do an errand – to get a few things done.

Instead, I have met a legendary being that I have not thought I would ever meet.

“They named me Turka,” Prima Meister Turka said as he raised his glass in salute and laughed.

Oh my God!

As I watched him laugh, I sobered up quick enough, for new thoughts and feelings flashed through the drunken haze that had obscured my spirit. A moan escaped my lips as I looked at that hard face before me.

The Prima Meister was the guardian of the Furnace of Eternity, which is said to be the heart and the origin of the dwarven race.

“Why is a Prima Meister out here?” I muttered to myself, for Prima Meisters never left the Furnace of Eternity.

CHAPTER 96
YOU CAN'T DO IT WITH A BARE MOUTH (3)

The dwarves have always been pretty good neighbors. They are stout and possess a silvery pride, and give all to attain victory. Even if they are attacked countless times, they have never invaded the realms of others.

However, there are times when dwarves do go crazy, looking straight ahead and only straight ahead.

It is whenever there is a problem with the Eternal Furnace.

During such times, the dwarves became so fierce that not even the intrepid orcs can escape their wrath.

They were so ruthless that even the wise giants could come up with no countermeasures, merely waiting for the dwarves to calm down eventually.

The elves were always hard on the dwarves, but they absolutely avoided any conflict with them during such times.

Suffice it to say, the Eternal Furnace was of grave importance to the dwarves.

Now, however, those whose duty it is to defend the very heart of their race had seemingly given it up and come out into the world.

To see such a thing clearly meant that there was a problem with the furnace.

And such a state of affairs was unacceptable to me.

I needed the dwarves, but what I needed were the skillful masters and not a bunch of lunatics who ran berserk into any battle.

"Tchu, I ran out of drink."

Turka, the dwarf was considering his thirst as he stared at the empty barrels.

I looked at him quietly, but it was not easy to grasp his innermost feelings by just staring at his wrinkled face. So- I asked him straight up what had happened to the Eternal Furnace.

“Nothing’s happened yet,” he said, and it seemed that my judgment had been premature.

“It looks like it will happen soon enough.”

Turka wiped his wooden cup clean and returned it to his pack, finally looking at me and saying, “Because the furnace is nearing the end of its life.”

* * *

“This party is over! Get up, you drunks!”

Turka had started kicking the asses of the sleeping dwarves. They had slept quite happily after emptying all the kegs, so they now awoke with curses on their lips.

“A true inspiring dwarf wakes his comrades up with fine words! Why are you kicking us and screaming so?”

“Kaak, heck! You’re really like a grumpy old man, Turka!”

Seeing that these dwarves spoke so casually with the Prima Meister told me that they were no ordinary dwarves either. The only dwarves that would dare to be cocky with the master of masters were the masters themselves. While the dwarves were fussing about, I helped Arwen onto one of our own wagons, as she was still pretty much out for the count after her binge.

“No…” Gwain groaned, as if suffering from a nightmare, so I picked him up like a sack of grain and lifted him into the wagon.

“See you again,” I told Turka. I drove the wagon on, finally reaching the group that we had left some distance from the hill. They stretched their eyes wide as they took in the sorry state of Arwen and Gwain.

“What about Jordan? See him?” I asked, and a ranger pointed to the rear of the encampment.

Jordan, who I suspected had fled from the harsh drinking party, had a drooping posture. He giggled as he saw me approach and said, “I came here to find my bow for the hunt, then staggered and fell over, and just stayed here.”

I also laughed as I imagined Jordan’s sprawling form lying here, hungover.

However, my laughter did not last long, and my expression quickly hardened.

As Prima Meister Turkad had said, the party was over. It was time for us to move.

“Let’s head back.”

We returned to Galbaram Fortress. I immediately met up with the legion commander and delivered the letter from Turka.

“These are the conditions they have presented.”

The commander’s eyes widened, and he hastily opened the letter and read it.

“I have to prepare a negotiating team.”

After he had read the letter, he looked at me with a strange expression.

I had seen such an expression many times, and so used was I to it, that it bored me.

“Thank you,” the commander said. I got up from my seat and roughly shook his hand, then left. I was extremely tired and in a hurry to return to my lodgings. My mana helped keep me up, but it could not completely overcome the fatigue of my mind and body.

I took an entire day off to sleep and recover. When I felt better, we left the fortress.

Two dwarves stood at the crossroads some way away from the fortress.

“It’s nice to see you again,” I told Prima Meister Turka and another Meister. “Where are the others?”

“They should stay here, and complete their duties with the kingdom’s negotiators.”

“Right.”

“But you come here empty-handed?” Turka asked me, as he had constantly been looking at the wagons behind me.

“Who was it that said that the party was over?” I retorted.

As I said this, Turka’s expression crumpled into despair.

“It’s a rude way to greet us,” he said.

“I’m in a hurry just because you seemed so nervous, Turka.”

What the hell was this? He was the one who had made such a great fuss about the ending of the Eternal Furnace’s life.

“It wouldn’t matter if we arrive a few days late,” he said.

I laughed at Turka’s brazen desire for alcohol, and he was sniffing the air all the while to make sure that we carried no booze.

“Let’s just go, before we drink,” I said.

Turka almost staggered back at the thought of such a grim journey.

“I have no words,” Turka said.

He and the other dwarf openly expressed their irritation to the humans on horseback.

On my account, I was really in a hurry, and these dwarven nobles did appear naked without their fine carriages. I could not halt my journey to cater to the whims of their alcoholic race.

I offered the dwarves two light horses from the rangers, but they shook their heads. They stared at Arwen and Adelia for a while, with regretful faces.

“Tcha, you should know how to be ashamed at your ages,” I told the dwarves.

At my words, the other Meister -who had introduced himself as Surkara, started shouting:

“I don’t know about your motives, but I’m here in the midst of humans, and I’m bloody sober!”

The young meister and the old meister both looked equally pathetic due to their lack of booze, and they swore under their breaths.

“Hey now, I was quite polite when we met,” I chided Surkara. “I am doing my best to keep everyone here happy.”

I wasn’t just saying that.

If these two had not been members of the dwarven race, I would not have honored them so or allowed them to join me. It was the dwarves who had retreated to their holds to end the unending war, while the other major races would have had fought until they were either defeated or had to retire from battle.

“Well, that would be the first regret I have for coming with you then, and that ain’t on me,” Turka said.

Before I had met him, I was thinking about how to convince the dwarves. When I met them though, their worries and my position became clear.

Just as I needed something from them, they too had a desire that I could fulfill.

And considering their desperate need and the value their desire held, they were not the ones who held the hilt in our relationship.

If they didn’t know this, they would find out soon enough. So I knew that there did not exist a reason for me to bend back more for them than necessary.

Still, Turka remained greatly honored that he so much as met with the master smith who had forged Twilight, as he had glimpsed the sublime spirit of that craftsman in his creation.

Of course, I would still have to pay the price for bringing them with me.

“It feels like I’m trapped for some reason,” Turka said with a shake of his head as he revealed his innermost thoughts.

* * *

After riding for a few days, we reached the Rhinetes river which flowed all along the border between the central and northern regions. As we rode alongside it for another day, a large lake appeared. Beyond that lake was the bridge that we had barely held when we had thought the Warlord a few months ago.

We tarried there for a day, for I had to let my tired men and horses rest. Once we crossed that bridge, we would be entering a cold land where a sudden blizzard was no strange phenomenon.

“Let’s march.”

There was a notable change in the air as we crossed the river.

“I am privileged enough to live in the northern part of heaven. When I see those distant mountains with my own eyes, I become at ease.”

Everyone nodded at Ranger Jordan’s words.

I felt the same, and I breathed in deeply, letting the cold air penetrate my lungs.

It seemed crazy- what was so enjoyable about the cold, which made one’s bones ache?

Still, it felt like I had returned to my homeland.

Not everyone shared that joyous feeling, though.

“It extremely cold,” Carls stated as his face hardened, for he was surprised by the frigidity of the northern winds. Gwain and the others had not been in the north for long, so they also shrunk as the cold slammed into them.

“You all better get used to it quickly.”

The winters were much colder here, and Carls looked concerned after I had stated this.

When I asked him whether he regretted his decision to sacrifice the warmth of the palace, he firmly shook his head. However, such resolution was an ephemeral emotion when faced by the storming blizzard that met us as we traveled on.

“Why am I coming to such a cold place?”

I chuckled as I heard Carls’s cry mixing with the howling of the wind.

I could hear them all complaining like little boys.

As I listened to the shouts of the palace knights, I kept on walking through that blizzard for quite some time until the winds finally died down.

A great white snowfield was revealed around us, and beyond it was a sheer cliff, with a fortress connected to it, wall to stone.

“Oh, oh!”

The palace knights who had been cursing the cold north a day ago had all now shut their mouths in wonder.

They seemed to be overwhelmed by the majesty of a white fortress, a sight that one would not see anywhere else in the kingdom.

‘Dagdak, dagdak,’ came the distant sound as the fortress gates ground open. A group of black-armored knights rode out. They were the Black Lancers, having returned here along with the northern lords.

‘Your Highness!”

Next to the one-eyed knight commander was a face that was happy to see me. It was the new Count of Winter Castle, my cousin Vincent.

“Woah, woah!”

Vincent brought his horse to a halt before me and dismounted. I did so as well.

We met each other and he embraced me.

“Thank you for being okay, Your Highness.”

“Seeing you like this, it looks like you have been on the battlefield!” I said as I returned his hug by embracing his shoulders.

Across Vincent's shoulder, I could see the walls of Winter Castle. Rangers and knights were lined up on the wall, and they waved as they looked at me.

"You are back," Vincent reiterated.

After taking in the familiar scenery and the sincere greetings, I realized that I had returned home. Still, even if I was home, I had no time to rest.

"Here is the report of what had been done so far," Vincent said.

I didn't want a welcoming dinner or anything, but it was a bit much to be handed the documents so promptly upon my return.

"You welcomed me just to give me this," I stated, but Vincent did not even listen to my complaint.

"These are all the things Your Highness said must be done," he said, and then complained that his head pained after he had to include the sons of the nobles into the organization of everything.

I could give little excuse, for all the developments and the training of the military that was taking place in the north was started upon my initiative.

I couldn't give my eyes time to rest, so I immediately went to check the report.

"It's all done!" I exclaimed, giving a cry of hurray, but Vincent appeared by my side like a ghost and dragged me to the various places. We first visited the training center of those knights with their new mana hearts.

"After visiting the capital, your face has improved," someone said as he walked out among the sweaty men.

It was Bernardo Eli, and he started to complain. He seems to have suffered quite a bit while filling the role of instructor for the grumpy Mana Heart Knights.

I casually ignored his complaints and looked at the 500 knight candidates that were lined up behind him.

"About 300 of them have attained the level of sword users. The other half is expected to follow soon enough, in three to six months," Bernardo said as he puffed out his

chest. Normally. I would not have been impressed, but this time I was.

400 years ago, most sword users were mere apprentices, so the results achieved here in such a short time were amazing.

Of course, most of those who had reached that level were men who had been the secret knights of the royal family, but that did not mean that Bernardo's contribution was insignificant.

"I am impressed."

More than anything else, I liked the fact that the men's eyes, which had once held the gaze of rotten fish, had become very sharp.

Of course, the emotions in those eyes were in no way favorable to me.

"Hmmm," I mused as I looked at Bernardo, who had an upturned nose.

"Huh?"

Yes, Bernardo's achievements had exceeded my expectations. When he had first come to Winter Castle, he had been a beginner Sword Expert. He had now reached the level of Advanced Sword Expert.

"It's true, that you learn more through teaching."

Hearing him so proudly proclaim his achievements sickened me to the core. Now, not only Arwen and Adelia but also Bernardo was overtaking me.

Why did I have to get such a weak body?

Once more, I realized how cursed this body was.

"Starting today, they have to team up with the patrols and head into the mountain range," I ordered, then added, "It is time that they experience true battle."

Bernardo nodded.

"And unconditionally, you should go with them."

“Isn’t that the same as saying that I have to kill and grow my skills in the mountains all the time?”

“Because I do not want harm to come to them, you, their instructor, should be with them.”

“There are many other knights in the castle that-“

“Who’s their instructor?”

“That would be me.”

“Good, remember it.”

Bernardo glanced at me, but I ignored his stupid face. I felt a bit calmer.

“I’m not saying that I am intentionally trying to make you suffer, Bernardo. This is for the future.”

“And what is that future?”

“Once they become knights, you will have to lead them. “

Bernardo had been looking at me with resentment, but once I said this, his eyes widened and his mouth began to move.

“Please leave it to me, then! I will not let harm come to a single knight.”

“Okay. You start tomorrow.”

I patted his shoulder and turned around. He beat his chest to show his courage for the mission.

Vincent was staring at me, and I shook my head.

Vincent also shook his head, and so led me to the next place.

Although their numbers were still far below capacity, I still made sure to encourage the Black Lancers and their newly recruited candidates. They were there to steadily build up the pre-war strength of the knightly order.

Among them was Gallahan, a descendant of the 'Assaulting Knight', one of the seven Blood Lions.

After confirming his achievements on his screen, I widened my eyes.

"Is this one also so advanced already?" I muttered to myself.

Boris, a descendant of the Blood Lion Jingu, was on the same level.

"Haa…" a sigh escaped from me. Both of them had become Advanced Sword Experts.

I was used to people having to reach such top levels only after they suffered near-death events on the most brutal of battlefields, even if they got their mana boosted. I sighed with regret that we did not have this type of progress in my time.

"You look serious, why aren't you speaking?" Vincent's voice said as he noted my grievance. His face looked ridiculous.

"The age of Your Highness is seventeen, and you have only learned the sword for a year and a half, and yet you seem to look deprived to see knights of such skill."

"No, I'm a little different."

He didn't know how many lives I had taken, through my ages as a sword.

But of course, I couldn't tell him that I was a centuries-old sword.

"I will do what I have to, and bear through it."

So what? My ego would just be bruised for a while.

"Don't go around everywhere saying that," came Vincent's cold words, and I left him as I headed for my room.

As I opened the door, I heard a terrible, rattling sound.

'Rikitiktik, rikitikclik.'

And there was the High Lich, in the midst of drawing her plans, her bones ever-rattling.

“Ophe-“

“Shhhh!” She raised her finger and pointed to the door, which was her way of greeting me. She hadn’t even looked at me.

She had merely told me to get out.

* * *

As I wandered along the wall with nowhere else to go, a gruff voice called to me.

“This is an amazing place!”

I turned, and there was Turka: Sitting on a keg. Now, where had he gotten that?

I sat down next to him.

“What is so amazing about it?”

“There is not a place in the kingdom that we dwarves heard of which did not decline through the centuries. This castle breaks that pattern, it has withstood the ages well.”

Turka’s wrinkled gaze ran across the entirety of Winter Castle. When he took in the stationed rangers and the training apprentices, he nodded more eagerly.

“This fortress is like a great dragon’s nest.”

He looked some more

“I don’t know if that’s an appropriate description, in a kingdom that has been built by the killing of dragons,” he added and then laughed.

I shrugged. The knights that had been so carefully selected and trained by the royal family had been reforged here, and the strong-spirited men of the north had been made into soldiers.

Moreover, I heard that hot-blooded and talented folk were all flocking to the north as the rumors of the orcish war reached their ears.

Nevertheless, I still felt as if that would not be enough – I didn’t have a chin yet, and I

had to deal with that great and vast empire.

“Again, I must say, it’s a cold place.”

Turka said this, adding that he did not mind the cold, even if it did linger year-round.

“There’s no place more suited to building the new Eternal Furnace than here.”

The conviction in his voice shook me to my core.

“And you thought I would be forgetting everything just because we had been drinking?”

Turka laughed, asking himself if such a thing was even possible.

His stubby, thick finger pointed to the southwest.

“According to the records, there is a breath of fire, a vein of lava that runs underground somewhere over there. I’m thinking about building the new furnace there. A real Eternal Furnace, that would burn with greater intensity and last longer than the one that came before it.”

I had wagered that he would ask me this.

“I haven’t given permission to you yet.”

“I’m not asking this with just my bare mouth,” Turka said, and then took loud gulps from his wooden cup.

“Sure, it ain’t a seven-story tower, but if you want, I can build an entire dungeon for you beneath the earth.”

CHAPTER 97
GEOGRAPHY OF FISHERMEN (1)

Before accepting Turka's proposal, I called Vincent to me and explained the situation. No matter what I wanted to do, the lands surrounding Winter Castle were still the lands of the Balahard family, so the decision was not mine alone to make.

"What would dwarves want in a land with orcs as their neighbors?" he asked, but he still gave me his permission, asking me to proceed as I wished, and to ask him if there was anything that he could help with.

"I will gladly accept the renting fees from dwarves," he joked.

I promised that I would repay his total trust in me in my own way. I then made my preparations for leaving the fortress promptly.

"Jordan, I have a mission."

"Right now?" Ranger Jordan asked me, enjoying the rest that rangers were entitled to after long-distance patrols or equivalent quests. He was a bit disgusted.

"Everyone else is resting, so why must I-"

I stopped the ranger's complaining abruptly.

"You ran away in the middle of our negotiations. Wouldn't you like to make up for it?"

His face turned into a mulish expression, and I cocked my hand into the shape of a cup and drank.

"Now, who the hell said I ran-"

"You telling me that you didn't?"

He frowned with a groan. If he had a better reason, he wasn't speaking it.

I chuckled and then laughed as I looked at his face.

“Then, I know you would like to lead the 17th platoon on a mission.”

“No.”

I couldn’t understand where the hell this man’s pride was, and he would probably be drunk, even if he were to die soon.

Jordan then spat out a few toxic invectives.

“You depart the day after tomorrow.”

I left Jordan and once more met up with Turka, who was also told about the schedule.

“It’s nice to get some things done in this cold,” he said. Turka might have been sulking a few days ago, but his ambition was now so clear to me.

Shortly before we left, I gathered all the rangers so that we could schedule our route. Turka pulled a map from his bag and said, “We’re to prospect from this side, first.”

His thick finger pointed to a spot on the map, which was filled with strange symbols. In that manner, our party’s destination was decided. The next day was terribly bright, and I met up with Jordan and his rangers in front of the fortress.

“I’m thinking that we head all along the cliff.”

We did, heading west along the cliff that faced Winter Castle.

We walked for a time, keeping a distance between ourselves and the cliff in case of avalanches or rockfalls.

A blizzard came upon us in the middle of our journey, but Jordan had noticed the change in atmosphere in advance and had guided us into a cave set into the cliff-face so that we would encounter the blizzard on the snowfield.

“Well done, Jordan.”

“When we return, you better give me ten days’ leave.”

After so many many veteran rangers had died, Jordan was the best ranger in Winter Castle. I figured that I could reward him with some rest after forcefully dragging him here.

When dawn broke, we left the cave and continued heading west. After about a week, Turka stated that we had reached the north-westernmost point that he had marked on his map.

“Is it here, then?” Jordan asked. Turka shook his head as he turned to the ranger.

“I don’t sense any energy here.”

Turka asked if we could head a little further west.

“Just a ways away from here is the western border of the kingdom,” Jordan said, looked at me, and asked if we should head further.

“Let’s go as far as we can.”

After I had given permission, Jordan and the rangers guided us with nervous faces. The dwarves followed, stopping from time to time to dig into the snow, sniffing into the holes that they made.

“More west.”

Turka sounded as if he had sensed something, and Jordan gave me another look as he said, “If we head that way for one more day, we will really be outside of the kingdom.”

“What is beyond the border?”

“I do not know,” Jordan said with a stern face, “because none of the rangers who have crossed the border have ever returned.”

“Let’s head to the border at once.”

“If it seems dangerous, will you pull us over it with force?” came the playful words of the rangers, who had become cheerful.

We walked for another day. The rangers who had scouted ahead halted, looking at

me as if they had made a discovery.

Over their shoulders I could see tattered and half-torn flags fluttering, their poles stuck at oblique angles into the snow.

These flags were the border markers of the Leonberg Kingdom.

Beyond them stood a forest with snow-capped trees.

“That’s it.”

Turka and Surkara stepped to the front ranks.

“Do you feel it?” Surkara asked.

“Very well,” Turka responded.

They had stopped in front of a flag, exchanging words that I could not make out.

Before I could even ask what was going on, Turka pulled his shovel from his bag and started digging into the snow.

He dug as if possessed.

The snow that had settled there over so many years was removed, and finally, bare earth was revealed.

Turka thrust his head into the pit and stayed like that for a while.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re doing,” I said.

Jordan was gripping his crossbow and mumbled complaints as he guarded the hole beneath the flag. The rangers seemed to want to leave the area as soon as possible, but they also seemed annoyed by the weird actions of the dwarves.

There came a sudden frantic movement from the hole, and Turka started to wriggle like a worm, his feet paddling in the air as if he was having a seizure.

“Gotcha!” Suraka cried as he hugged onto Turka’s short legs and pulled him out like a radish.

Turka's face flushed brightly, his eyes bloodshot, with his beard covered in snow and dirt.

The old dwarf's face was almost invisible under all that muck after he had been pulled from his upside-down exploration in the snow.

Inside of that mess, Turka smiled brightly.

"I found it!" he cried.

"The records were correct!" came Sukara's jubilant exclamation.

The two dwarves grabbed one another's hands and began to dance in jolly circles and with energized little leaps.

"Let's hear what is going on first before we dance," I said.

Only after he heard me did Turka remember the presence of the humans. He turned to me with a face filled with excitement and exultation.

"The records are correct! A great lava river flows right below us! If it flows strong enough, the Eternal Furnace will last for a thousand years, not five-hundred!" came Turka's excited explanation. "This is the place that we have been looking for."

"It isn't a suitable place for my dungeon," I told Turka, who seldom considered things that were not to his direct advantage.

"So you know what that means."

"What do you mean? You want us to re-negotiate terms?" he demanded as he puffed himself up.

"Now come on Turka, what did-"

"Nobody said you could rent our land," a new voice spoke, and I looked to find its source.

I could see so many brightly shining pupils glittering in the unusually deep darkness of the white forest.

I felt a piercing gaze fall on me, one that did not feel murderous or hostile, which made it feel even eerier.

I knew what beings had eyes like that.

Turka shrugged. “I never said my project wouldn’t include some conflict with the elves.”

Sure, I thought.

The elves appeared without a sound, drifting through the trees like the ghosts of the apocalypse.

And in the midst of them, there stood a thousand-year-old maniac elf.

“I have come to meet my bridegroom,” the Elder High Elf Sigrun said as she smiled with those pure white teeth of hers. Her gaze left me and fell upon the dwarves. They had been overly excited, and now, far too late, had realized their carelessness.

“Still, I don’t know what exactly these gifts are that he brought me, but they sure look fun,” Sigrun said with that bright smile – as if I had indeed given her a great present.

Still, her smile contained the feelings of a predator which territory has been invaded; there was not a lick of genuine joy to be found anywhere.

She looked at me again, and I could see that her eyes demanded an explanation from me. Gone was her pretense – her faux love and favor. I sighed as I met her icy gaze. I had known that there was an elven forest to the northwest of the kingdom. What I did not know was how far this forest had expanded over the past four hundred years, so much so that it now touched the borders of the kingdom.

While I was wrapped in my own thoughts, Sigrun suddenly disappeared from the spot that she had been standing on.

‘Klang!’

At that moment, a sound echoed and I turned to its source. Turka held his ax out, shielding himself, and before him stood Sigrun with a drawn sword.

“I regret your reflexes. I was so hoping to cut off an arm.”

“Hah! You elves have always been a vicious race, now as much as always,” Turka said and spat to the snow as he held his ax fixed before him. There was no sign of an awe-inspiring elf. There just stood a thousand-year-old monster.

Turka’s hatred was natural, for a Prima Meister was never one who would bow down before an Elder High Elf.

Still, things looked bad.

A fully-prepared dwarf could not be touched by the elves, but in a sudden situation like this, Turka’s advantages were relatively inferior.

Moreover, there were dozens of elves along with the Elder High Elf – and only two dwarves.

If we did not intervene, the dwarves would, in all likelihood, be killed by the elves.

This was not the situation that I had been hoping for.

Rangers clenched their teeth as the energy level started to increase dramatically with the elves and dwarves facing off.

The rangers’ souls had been tempered during battles against the Warlord’s armies. Even if this release of power was only the tip of the iceberg, the rangers managed to resist the power of this transcendental being.

I laughed, overjoyed by their boldness.

At the same time, I channeled the mana that had rested within my own body.

“Fire!” I ordered, and the strings of bows and crossbows twanged as the rangers loosed their missiles.

‘Klang!’

Sigrun’s sword met Turka’s ax as arrows filled the air. A sapphire beam flashed out from Sigrun’s eyes. The elves look just about ready to slaughter the rangers.

“Get back!” I yelled as a flash of energy struck between dwarf and elf, blocking Sigrun’s beam.

I walked in between them, pulling Twilight from the snow where I had thrown it.

I wiped it off.

“You both seem to have forgotten,” I said as I looked at them in turn, “that this is not a land of elves, nor of dwarves.”

They glanced at me.

“This is my kingdom,” I declared as I kept staring at them.

[The Poetry of the Defeated King] rang out in my mind.

‘Isn’t it mine, either those high halls,

Or that dignified throne?

There is nothing that is not my seat.’

It was my land, for I had conquered the occupying Warlord and his greenskin army.

It was only right that I claim it, for I had become the usurper when I had defeated the King of the Orcs.

“Get back,” I ordered with passion welling up from my soul.

‘Sheeek.’

It was Sigrun who sheathed her sword first. She looked at me, her face filled with satisfaction. The way she stared at me was the way in which a bird would look at the ripening fruits on a tree, which was an uncomfortable feeling.

Still, she showed no sign of opposing me.

Turka then withdrew from the stand-off.

He did not lower his ax, but it didn’t seem as if he would rush the elf and start chopping, as he had before.

After I had separated the Prima Meister from the Elder High Elf, I said, “Don’t make

war in my kingdom."

The elf laughed, and the dwarf coughed.

* * *

I had barely diffused a bloody situation wherein ax and sword had already clashed. The atmosphere had in no way changed into a charitable one. Sigrun was a maniac that would draw her sword for no reason at all, and Turka was a stubborn old dwarf that would not hesitate to go all-in if a fight broke out.

It was never easy to mediate between dwarves and elves, but that did not mean that it was impossible.

They had no choice but to listen to my demands.

Sigrun did not plan to oppose me so early in her game, and Turka was not willing to claim the kingdom's land by force.

"That is the land of elves," I said as I pointed to the forest of mistletoe-filled trees.

"And from this point lies the lands of the kingdom," I said as lowered my finger, pointing to the snow upon which I stood.

"And under this land of the kingdom, is the land of the dwarves!" I declared.

"From this day on, these flags mark the border between the three realms."

CHAPTER 98
GEOGRAPHY OF FISHERMEN (2)

The dwarf and elf gave no answer to my declaration, not one of them even raising an objection.

I had to do this. I had to make sure that they kept to the ancient promise.

“This is so that the rules are followed.”

It was a sacred sacrament that the heads of the surviving races had made when the great war of the distant past had ended. I had gifted the words of it to this world through the lips of Agnes Bayern, who had been one of the Five Predecessors of humanity.

“The elves head into the forests, and the dwarves shall gain the under-earth.”

It was one of the terms of the Declaration of the End of the Great War.

“Okay, it was said thusly,” Turka said in an awkward tone as he nodded, throwing a glance at Sigrun. She was smiling, yet had failed to hide the displeasure of her innermost being. That was because humans and dwarves had banded together, making the elves the only ones who lost by the declaration.

Human beings, who had lived like slaves or even livestock, had finally triumphed and become the masters of this continent. The dwarves had pulled themselves from the war, suffering neither defeat nor claiming victory. The elves were the only remaining defeated race after the war.

It was a shameful historical event for the elves, and if my words did not make them uncomfortable, it would be strange indeed. Still, the fact that Sigrun did not like my words did not change reality. Even if she was a monstrous Elder High Elf who had existed for a millennium, history remained history.

No, especially due to the fact that she had lived so long, she knew all too well that she couldn’t break the covenant.

Her name was among the names of sixty-four high elves which had been inscribed in the declaration at the end of the war. If she denies that she is bound by the covenant, she stands to lose much, for that is the essence of a covenant between such high-ranking beings.

As I had expected, Sigrun did not object to my declaration. She just said that she could never become a good neighbor with a stinky dwarf, but I knew the possibility of an imminent and drawn-out war had been averted.

She had listened to me without a further word and then disappeared silently into the forest.

“I thought I would have to wage a war. Thanks to you, it all worked out well,” Turka said with a laugh as Sigrun left.

“I didn’t know there still existed any humans who remember the ancient covenant.”

His admiring words made me laugh. He couldn’t even know that I was the author of that very agreement.

It was usually so with the seeds that I had planted in this world. No one knew that I was present, and no one knew just how involved I was. And I did not really know either. Only by walking this world could I truly know the benefits that my actions had.

“The elves head into the forests, and the dwarves shall gain the under-earth.”

I once more repeated the words of the covenant, and this time through my own mouth, not Agnes’s.

“Good, good,” Turka stated as he heard my words.

“I accept your proposal, and will establish the new kingdom of our race under this land.”

He looked very happy as the problem of the new Eternal Furnace was half-solved.

However, although the matter of a new furnace has been settled, his accounting with me has not yet been resolved.

“Before all that, you have to check your bill with me.”

Turka laughed.

“You cancer, so I still have to pay for it?” he stated, still laughing. “We dwarves are at least not breakers of our bonds, like those slick elves.”

His laughter did not last long, and his face hardened as he saw my expression.

“The price I demand corresponds to the value of the boon,” I stated.

His joy was replaced by clear anxiety.

“Is it possible to have ten great swords forged by the Meisters?” I asked as I looked at Turka, and then continued on in a humming tone, “Or maybe a hundred pieces of dwarven armor?”

I forced myself not to smile, yet the corners of my mouth kept creeping up.

“How much, in fact, is it worth for you if I manage to end the grudge of a millennium-old Elder High Elf?”

Turka’s stiff face now looked as if it had died.

* * *

Since our mission was done, there was no need to stay. We immediately returned to the fortress, and I called a meeting with Vincent and the other heads of Winter Castle.

“Anyway, if we live above ground, why can’t we give them that which is beneath?”

The leaders did not disagree with the settling in of the new neighbors.

Rather, they were excited about the prospect of reputable blacksmiths moving in next-door. They unanimously approved the migration of the dwarves.

That was it.

They figured that they were just giving the land to be settled, and had no more to say.

Not one of them suggested demanding a price from the dwarves.

“I gave up useless land, but I guess they can pay us something for it,” said Vincent, mentioning the price in such a manner.

“So what do we ask in return?”

“Ten dwarven swords!”

The problem with these men was that they wanted an insignificant reward for something that the dwarves sorely needed.

“Oh! Oh! Ten bags of full of dwarven swords?”

“Yes, I’m sure they’ll give that to the head of the Balahard family!”

The commanders raised their thumbs, trying to support Vincent’s idea of asking a price as much as possible.

“Would it be okay if we asked them for at least one spear?”

“No, leave the spear, but ask for five suits of armor. We have to get some variety, at least.”

Quéon decided to speak, tabling a selfish proposal, and other lancers joined him in his request.

“We should include spears and armor.”

Applause poured out, and the commanders praised Vincent, who was rubbing his nose. The one-eyed cavalry commander clapped his hands together and exclaimed, “You are also a lord, so they must listen.”

I laughed until I could laugh no more.

These large men were all so distracted, wildly excited by the paltry prices that they were thinking up.

“Let them pay a great price.”

The excited men grew silent as they heard my words.

“Isn’t it unreasonable to ask for so little, if you are basically giving the dwarves the entire north to carve their halls into?”

Vincent jumped from his seat as he protested my words.

“I guess you don’t know the value of ten dwarven swords, because you have been in the royal palace your entire-“

“How much is it worth? Tell me!”

“On my life, I can’t even buy one even if I offered a thousand gold coins!” They are incredibly expensive since they are so hard to forge.”

As I heard his harsh words, it was clear that he did not even have a clear estimate of their worth. He was thinking in vague terms and thinking that ten swords were worth a kingdom just because they were weapons that any warrior would dream of possessing.

“You are being pathetic,” I told him.

He was not about to be insulted in such a manner and almost stepped up to me, but I hit him with the truth before he could.

“I knew you guys would be like this, so I’ve been asking for a higher price.”

The men of Winter Castle all looked at me with anticipation.

“Then what did you choose for us to receive in return?”

“Sword, spear, shield, and armor.”

“No different from what I was expecting,” Vincent stated, then asked with a groan, “How many, then?”

I raised one of my fingers.

“A single one of each?”

I shook my head.

“Ten!?”

Again, I shook my head.

The commanders all looked at me wide-eyed. One of them tentatively asked, “Well then, no way that-“

“One hundred.”

The men all stopped talking once I had said this.

“One hundred pieces of armor and weapons, total?” Vincent sputtered out the question as he broke the long silence that had reigned.

“Of course not! A hundred of each!”

Silence descended once more.

“One hundred swords, one hundred spears, one hundred shields, and one hundred suits of armor.”

Even after realizing it as I explained it to them again and again, they didn’t speak.

“How have you done it?” came the first cry.

“One hundred of each!”

Soon enough, their words became cheers.

“Long live the first prince!”

“Praise him!”

The men who had praised Vincent’s simple ideas were now cheering my name.

Vincent scrunched up his face but soon began to cheer along.

And I haven’t given them the most important news yet.

“There’s more.”

I continued talking as I looked at the men, who seemed as if they wished to kiss and hug me in joy.

“The dwarves have decided to take on the repairs of Winter Castle’s gate, spire, and walls that have been damaged in the last war.”

The men who had cheered suddenly held confused faces.

“And as soon as these repairs are done, the greatest weapon of the dwarves will be deployed to Winter Castle.”

“Their strongest weapon?”

As I looked at the faces of these men, I was sure some of them were about to pass out.

“But what is it?”

They wanted to know what the hell this weapon was that would come to the fortress.

“The dwarves call it Cheolpo. It is an artillery cannon.”

They tilted their heads at my answer, seeming to have no idea what the iron gun was.

It was natural.

Even in the days when Muhunshi had ruled the world, not many humans had known of the existence of these terrifying weapons that spat out fire and iron.

Even fewer humans existed who had grasped the full power of Cheolpo.

I was one of the few who had truly witnessed it, seeing its power in person.

The iron guns of the dwarves had finally brought down Gwangryong, the great dragon, who had been master of the skies, attacking the races of the earth.

“The dwarves shall explain its workings in greater detail later,” I declared with a joyous smile.

I was excited for the men of Winter Castle to witness the power of Cheolpo with their own eyes.

I wasn't sure, but I guessed that there would be some of them who would piss their pants.

"Vincent. Later, when I demonstrate the power of Cheolpo, be sure to stand in front of me."

"Oh, oh! If you give me that chance…"

I laughed for a long time, for when I had looked at the smiling Vincent, I had known that he suspected nothing.

* * *

The meeting was over, and all the commanders left their seats.

"Vincent," I said as I caught him trying to leave the room.

I then told him of another price I had asked from the dwarves, one I did not wish to mention before the men.

"It's a dungeon."

Vincent frowned.

Dungeons in this world were known mostly as the dens of evil wizards, or the fathomless depths that stretched to the abyss in which the demons dwelled. And they mostly appeared in the old stories. Vincent knew this well.

He looked somewhat dejected by the prospect of a dungeon beneath his lands.

"Do you have any reason to dig it beneath Winter Castle? Because that saddens me."

He continued. "We are not moles, so why even construct things underground? It is only those without pride that have anything to hide."

"I guess you've forgotten," I told him. "We have a lot to hide, and we are the weaker guys."

We had five-hundred knights that were a direct contravention of the treaty. We were nurturing wizards for the future. And not even those two facts had to be obfuscated, no, we would need a place to hide our war supplies and all other sorts of things in the future.

A dungeon was essential for us, and no place was as suitable for secret-keeping as a dungeon.

Moreover, it wasn't just matters of security that I was thinking of.

It was only a matter of time until the dwarves started digging and carving their kingdom in the northwestern tip of the kingdom. At such a time, the dungeon would serve as a gateway, connecting the kingdom of the dwarves with Winter Castle. Any goods that they would wish to supply to the kingdom would have to head through my dungeon first.

Furthermore, a dungeon would serve as the most effective path through the north, for if the soldiers of Balahard marched via subsurface passages, they would not have to march through blizzards and ankle-deep snow. Furthermore, no one would even know that they were on the march.

Such an enormous advantage was not to be scoffed at, and it would be foolish to oppose the construction of dungeons out of laziness or fear.

Count Vincent Balahard was no fool. He quickly grasped the military application and advantage of such a subterranean passageway, and he gave me a thumbs-up.

"Build that dungeon, to your heart's content."

The head of the Balahard family had agreed, and so the treaty between the north and the dwarves, as set out by me, was born.

"I shouldn't have given up as much as dear old Cheolpo," Turka grumbled.

No one listened to the complaining dwarf, who stood with his hands in his pockets as if he had been deeply wronged.

And deep into one night, some days after we had successfully signed the treaty with the dwarves, an uninvited guest visited my room.

“Your Highness. It was not wise to place others, especially those others, before you fiance,” said the maniac elf – who had been humiliated at the border – after she had come to me.

“I was waiting,” I welcomed her.

“You mean, for me?” she asked, her tone possessing a natural grace.

“Now, my business with the dwarves is done. I have yet to finish with you elves.”

She folded her arms as she looked at me. Her attitude was one that seemed to say: “Please, do talk to your heart’s content.”

So, I talked to my heart’s content.

“Now, I’ve prevented the war with the dwarves. So- what else do the elves want to pay for?”

CHAPTER 99
GEOGRAPHY OF FISHERMEN (3)

Her arms were crossed, her frown unchanged, and her attitude of waiting was the same.

The look she gave me was different, though.

A while ago, she had told me to talk. Now, her eyes were asking me for an explanation.

“The meisters of the dwarf race were there that day because they were seeking a place to construct a new furnace, to replace the one that is expiring.”

Sigrun remained silent.

“If you had harmed or hindered them, all the dwarves would have gone mad the moment they lost their old furnace, and they would all have headed north.”

Obviously, a single dwarf is weaker than an elf in many ways. The high elves can live past a thousand years, while the dwarven meisters only have an average lifespan of three-hundred years.

That difference in lifespan was the perfect example of the difference in power between the races.

Still, such a difference only exists on an individual level. When an army of dwarves

has finished their war preparations, the situation alters drastically.

Once the dwarves in the smelters and at the forges had been geared for war, arming themselves with iron guns, they became a juggernaut of metal and flame. They became a hammer that could smash anything and an inferno that could burn all.

Sigrun definitely knew what I meant, but nonetheless, she remained cynical.

“No matter how many of those dwarves come, we’ll slaughter them all.”

I shook my head at her words.

“If you win, it will be a pyrrhic victory. You will suffer greatly. At that time, the dwarves’ flame-cannons would have burned down all the forests you so care for.”

People often referred to elves as the ‘innocent keepers of the forest’, glorifying the obsession that common folk had for elves as well as their relationship with forests.

That was a misconception. The reason that the elves inhabited and protected the forest had nothing to do with a love for greenery.

“The elves head into the forests, and the dwarves shall gain the under-earth.”

Their habitation of such a verdant realm was because this had been the only land allowed to them by the treaty.

Deforestation meant decreasing the land of the elven kingdom. Burning the forest meant that their entire kingdom would be aflame.

The dwarven had the capability to burn all the elven kingdoms, even if the dwarves were defeated.

“I have already shown great favor to the elves,” I said as I sank my ass into the sofa. I buried my back deep into the cushion as I admired Sigrun’s expression.

When only her hardened face and the cynicism of her mind remained, it became clear that she was a dry thing that felt no life whatsoever. And little by little, her true essence was revealed, as if she was a pretty doll filled with nothing but coarse grains of desert sand.

A cruel madness suddenly flashed through her silvery eyes.

“Grace is the mercy that only the strong can offer the weak,” she warned me, her eyeballs piercing me as a needle pricks a finger. My skin felt aflame – as if I had been thrust into a furnace – and my breath came out constricted and wheezing. And she had not even revealed the full extent of her powers yet, she had but warned me.

My pride was hurt.

“If you wish to feign ignorance, then do so. I, too, will not demand a price from you, then,” I said, and my voice grew firmer, “but don’t expect anything from me anymore. It is you, not I, who has broken faith first.”

And then- the faint susurrus of Sigrun’s breathing completely stopped. She looked at me, her neck creaking like a broken doll’s.

The moment I met that gaze – I knew.

I had just crossed a line that should not have been crossed.

It was a true baring of her inner being, the revelation of an entity far greater than the Warlord.

Perhaps she merely saw me as a beast that could be killed with the single flick of a finger.

In all likelihood, I would die without so much as drawing my sword.

I didn’t raise a single eyebrow as I stood transfixed.

Elder High Elves rarely reveal themselves in this manner – only if the forests are threatened. Even if she had chosen to gently reveal her nature, it still felt that she was about to tame me and place a collar around my neck.

And that was not my way to live life, filling a leash like a dog.

Of course, I had never hoped to get killed like this: By a lunatic elf in my room.

“Come out,” I quietly whispered, looking straight at Ophelia. If she could, she would likely be having a seizure.

Even after I had spoken, Sigrun did not respond.

“Mage of the pure white night,” I said, and this seemed to harden her resolve.

‘Qooosh!’

With a flash, red eyes that smoldered as fire appeared in the darkest shadowy corner of the room.

“Even if you hadn’t asked, I was about to step out,” Ophelia stated.

In my time, she had been revered as a mage of the night by many humans, but now she was the High Lich Ophelia, a creature of bare bones.

The High Lich fully revealed herself in the shadows, her jaw rattling as she stared at the Elder High Elf.

It sounded as if Ophelia was laughing, yet no feeling of welcome was in that chuckle: It sounded quite terrifying.

Sigrun’s shoulders shook a little.

“I warn you in advance,” said Ophelia, “that the slightest violent gesture from you will be the harbinger of a macabre little dance.”

Geometric swirls of magical energy appeared on the floors, walls, the ceiling – everywhere.

The patterns were geometrically overlapping circles, five to seven circles existing in each form. It was the language that represented the truth and mystery of reality. Only mages could create such patterns.

“You will be struck by pure white light before the first tune of your song begins, elf.”

Sigrun’s body grew stiff, and conflicting impulses raged in her silver eyes.

I saw her internal conflict clearly.

It was with simple resentment and a warning on her lips that she had come to me. I had lost my temper after she had provoked me, but I knew even then that Sigrun would not benefit from harming me.

And into that situation came the unexpected appearance of the white night mage.

Previously, Sigrun stood to gain nothing from our encounter. Now, she faced an obvious loss.

The magic circles swirled all over the place, and only Ophelia knew the exact number of them and the magic that they would unleash.

It meant that it was the High Lich who reigned in the room.

Certainly, the Elder High Elf could still slice my throat before the mage even managed to trigger a single circle, but then Ophelia would still be alive.

Ophelia was a lich, so if Sigrun managed to cut into her neck, the spell would still be triggered.

Sigrun shifted her gaze to the floor. An intricate overlap of magical circles was shining directly below her.

'Shoook,' she gracefully sheathed her blade.

"I've never heard that you've come down from the mountains."

The anger and insanity of moments before had deserted Sigrun's face. She seemed more embarrassed than anything.

"If I knew it, I would've come and said hello at once," Sigrun added, now returned to her usual self. She stared at me.

"Highness. It is an unbearable insult, to bring another woman into your bed if you have a fiance."

She was not happy that I had Ophelia in my rooms and that the lich had shielded me.

"You are the one who first broke faith," came my answer.

After all, Sigrun had come here with malice in her heart, and she had broken our pretense of mutual aid – which we had maintained on the surface – out of pride.

It was she who had tried to coerce me with force.

"It is common to have quarrels between lovers. Are there not lovers who remain faithful in this world, even if they depart from one another so many times?" I said, my voice softly soothing but with a hint of a growl.

"Very well. I admit my rashness, and will so pay the price to uphold the grace of Your Highness," she decided, slightly raising her hands. "I will permanently appoint the nineteen sword-dancers to Your Highness."

On the face of it, this might seem a great gift, but the fact of it was that she lost nothing through such an offer.

What Sigrun had done from the get-go was to attach the elves to me as her eyes and ears. However, since the white night mage was at my side, their duties could no longer be fulfilled.

Moreover, Ophelia had just the other day referred to the swords-elves as 'half-blooded fairies', which meant they were not pure of blood. So those terrifyingly bloody elves were mixed-blooded sword-dancers and never truly of the elven race.

Sigrun had not handed them over to me, but rather abandoned them among the humans.

"Thank you," I said, hiding my knowledge that Sigrun had treated the sword-elves like trash.

They were good at stealth and reconnaissance. In battle, they fared as well as any knight, and though all their talents were certainly useful, I had never been able to completely trust them.

Only if I could utterly sever their gritty relationship with their former mistress could I take them in as followers.

With a few words, Sigrun mouthed a covenant and gave up all her rights to the swords-elves.

Just to make sure, Ophelia imposed a spell of coercion onto Sigrun's covenant. Only then were the sword-elves truly able to escape the influence of the Elder High Elf.

"Are you satisfied now?"

I shook my head at Sigrun's question.

"More effort is needed to mend my broken trust."

Sigrun frowned. "Is there anything more you want me to do? Unlike the dwarves, we don't have stockpiled treasures to dole out."

I smiled as she asked what exactly I was expecting from her.

From the first ages, the dwarves were the best when it came to crafting and metallurgy. Elves were the best in terms of magic and alchemy.

And what I wanted was the essences that they have distilled, which contained the blessing of the forest itself.

“Elixir,” I plainly stated. It was the ambrosial concoction of faerie-kind.

Sigrun frowned and asked, “Do you know what an elixir is?”

“As much as anyone knows.”

“As you humans know, Elixir is not a potion that gifts immortality, and if taken incorrectly, the human stands to lose much more than it would gain.,” Sigrun stated, adding, “Especially a promising knight such as Your Highness is set to lose much.”

She wasn’t making excuses because she didn’t want to give it to me. No, Sigrun really thought Elixir wasn’t going to help me. She seemed to worry that her future meal – that would be me – would be damaged before it became nice and plump.

“So? Will you give it to me? What is your answer?” I demanded as I pushed back.

Sigrun hesitated for a while, and then turned away from me.

“I hope your greed is not too great,” she said as she approached the window. As if just remembering, she added, “Look beyond the mountains.” With this, she disappeared through the window.

Over the wind, I heard a whisper: “The ruler of the mountain is in the wrong place, so the elf is upset.”

I turned around, and there was the High Lich, who had ruled one side of Mt. Seori, and she was looking at me with those depthless eyes of hers.

* * *

Rangers were dispatched to observe the situation beyond the mountain range.

“How long has the war been over? And something has already been released…”

I blamed myself, and Sigrun's last words had been a fierce rebuke.

It was a wake-up call, though, warning me of the feeling of dullness that had crept into my daily life.

It felt as if a knife had been jabbed into my heart.

It was only then that I realized the change: A sense of war has reached the noses of everyone in Winter Castle.

I was not as nervous as before.

Winter Castle was always prepared to fight against the foe. More than five-hundred knight candidates were training day and night, as well as an entire corps of new rangers. All these soldiers have diligently traversed the mountains and so gained a sense of actual combat.

I still waited for the scouting rangers to return.

They did not arrive, but one night an owl came and pecked at the window by my bed.

In its sharp claws, it grasped a vial filled with a liquid of an indescribable color.

It was a vial of Elixir, the potion sent by Sigrun.

Without any hesitation, took it from the owl uncorked it.

'Tuup.'

I relished the cloying scent that quickly penetrated my nostrils.

It was the blessing of the rich forest itself – the one thing that I need most right now.

It was the pure essence of mana, unrefined liquid magic.

I drank the elixir.

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